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Virgil Finl

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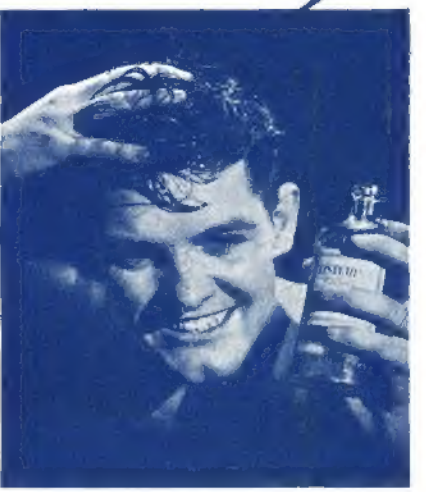

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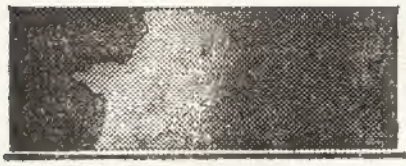

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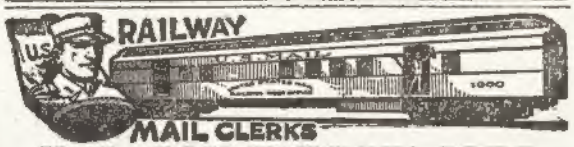

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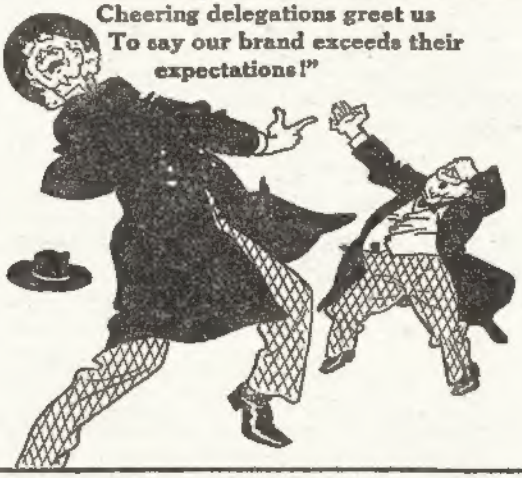

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The Valley Was Still

By MANLY WADE WELLMAN

A Federal army division lay in windrows in that weird valley, not dead nor yet asleep—an eery tale of the American Civil War

WIND touched the pines on the ridge, and stirred the thicker forest on the hills opposite; but the grassy valley between, with its red and white houses at the bottom, was as still as a painted backdrop in a theater. Not even a grasshopper sang in it.

Two cavalrymen sat their mounts at the

edge of the pines. The one in the torn butternut blouse hawked and spat, and the sound was strangely loud at the brink of that silence.

"I'd reckoned the Yanks was down in that there little town," he said. "Channow, it's called. Joe, you look like a Yank yourself in them clothes."

His mate, who wore half-weathered blue, did not appear complimented. The garments had been stripped from an outraged sergeant of Pennsylvania Lancers, taken prisoner at the Seven Days. They fitted their new wearer's lean body nicely, except across the shoulders. His boots were likewise trophies of war—from the Second Manassas, where the Union Army had learned that lightning can strike twice in the same place; and his saddle-cloth, with its U. S. stamp, had also been unwillingly furnished by the Federal army. But the gray horse had come from his father's Virginia farm, and had lived through a year of fierce fighting and fiercer toil. The rider's name was Joseph Paradine, and he had recently declined, with thanks, the offer of General J. E. B. Stuart to recommend him for a commission.

He preferred to serve as a common trooper. He was a chivalric idealist, and a peerless scout.

"You'd better steal some Yankee blues yourself, Dauger," he advised. "Those homespun pants would drop off of you if you stood up in your stirrups. . . . Yes, the enemy's expected to take up a position in Channow Valley. But if he had done so, we'd have run into his videttes by now, and that town would be as noisy as a county fair."

He rode from among the pines and into the open on the lower slope.

"You're plumb exposin' yourself, Joe," warned Dauger anxiously.

"And I'm going to expose myself more," returned Paradine, his eyes on the valley. "We've been told to find the Yankees, establish their whereabouts. Then our people will tackle them." He spoke with the confidence of triumph that in the summer of 1862 possessed Confederates who had driven the Union's bravest and best all through Virginia. "I'm going all the way down."

"There'll be Yanks hidin'," suggested Dauger pessimistically. "They'll plug you plumb full of lead."

"If they do," called Paradine, "ride back and tell the boys, because then you'll know the Yankees actually are in Channow." He put his horse to the slope, feeling actually happy at the thought that he might suffer for the sake of his cause. It is worthy of repetition that he was a chivalric idealist.

Dauger, quite as brave but more practical, bode where he was. Paradine, riding downhill, passed out of reach of any more warnings.

PARADINE'S eyes were kept on the village as he descended deep into silence as into water. He had never known such silence, not even at the frequent prayings of his very devout regiment. It made him nervous, a different nervousness from the tingling elation brought by battle thunders, and it fairly daunted his seasoned and intelligent horse. The beast tossed its head, sniffed, danced precariously, and had to be urged to the slope's foot and the trail that ran there.

From the bottom of the slope, the village was a scant two miles away. Its chimneys did not smoke, nor did its trees stir in the windless air. Nor was there sign or motion upon its streets and among its houses of red brick and white wood—no enemy soldiers, or anything else.

Was this a trap? But Paradine smiled at the thought of a whole Yankee brigade or more, lying low to capture one lone Southerner.

More likely they thought him a friend,

wearing blue as he did; but why silence in that case, either?

He determined to make noise. If there were hostile forces in and among the houses of Channow, he would draw their attention, perhaps their musket fire. Spurring the gray so that it whickered and plunged, he forced it to canter at an angle toward the nearest houses. At the same time he drew his saber, whetted to a razor-edge contrary to regulations, and waved it over his head. He gave the rebel yell, high and fierce.

"Yee-hee!"

Paradine's voice was a strong one, and it could ring from end to end of a brigade in line; but, even as he yelled, that yell perished—dropped from his lips, as though cut away.

He could not have been heard ten yards. Had his throat dried up? Then, suddenly, he knew. There was no echo here, for all the ridge lay behind, and the hills in front to the north. Even the galloping hoofs of the gray sounded muffled, as if in cotton. Strange . . . there was no response to his defiance.

That was more surprising still. If there were no enemy troops, what about the people of the town? Paradine felt his brown neck-hair, which needed cutting badly, rise and stiffen. Something sinister lay yonder, and warned him away. But he had ridden into this valley to gather intelligence for his officers. He could not turn back, and respect himself thereafter, as a gentleman and a soldier. Has it been noted that Paradine was a chivalric idealist?

But his horse, whatever its blood and character, lacked such selfless devotion to the cause of State's Rights. It faltered in its gallop, tried first to turn back, and then to throw Paradine. He cursed it feelingly, fought it with bit, knee and spur, and finally pulled up and dismounted. He drew the reins forward over the tossing gray head, thrust his left arm through the loop, and with his left hand drew the big cap-and-ball revolver from his holster. Thus ready, with shot or saber, he proceeded on foot, and the gray followed him protestingly.

"Come on," he scolded, very loudly—he was sick of the silence. "I don't know what I'm getting into here. If I have to retreat, it won't be on foot."

Half a mile more, at a brisk walk. A quarter-mile beyond that, more slowly; for still there was no sound or movement from the village. Then the trail joined a wagon track, and Paradine came to the foot of the single street of Channow.

He looked along it, and came to an abrupt halt.

The street, with its shaded yards on either side, was littered with slack blue lumps, each the size of a human body.

The Yankee army, or its advance guard, was there—but fallen and stony still.

"Dead!" muttered Paradine, under his breath.

But who could have killed them? Not his comrades, who had not known where the enemy was. Plague, then? But the most withering plague takes hours, at least, and these had plainly fallen all in the same instant.

PARADINE studied the scene. Here had been a proper entry of a strange settlement—first a patrol, watchful and suspicious; then a larger advance party, in two single files, each file hugging one side of the street with eyes and weapons commanding the other side; and, finally, the main body—men, horses and guns, with a baggage train—all as it should be; but now prone and still, like tin soldiers strewn on a floor after a game.

The house at the foot of the street had a hitching-post, cast from iron to represent a Negro boy with a ring in one lifted hand. To that ring Paradine tethered the now

almost unmanageable gray. He heard a throbbing roll, as of drums, which he identified as the blood beating in his ears. The saber-hilt was slippery with the sweat of his palm.

He knew that he was afraid, and did not relish the knowledge. Stubbornly he turned his boot-toes forward, and approached the fallen ranks of the enemy. The drums in his ears beat a cadence for his lone march.

He reached and stood over the nearest of the bodies. A blue-bloused infantryman this, melted over on his face, his hands slack upon the musket lying crosswise beneath him. The peaked forage cap had fallen from rumpled, bright hair. The cheek, what Paradine could see of it, was as downy as a peach. Only a kid, young to die; but was he dead?

There was no sign of a wound. Too, a certain waxy finality was lacking in that slumped posture. Paradine extended the point of his saber and gingerly prodded a sun-reddened wrist.

No response. Paradine increased the pressure. A red drop appeared under the point, and grew. Paradine scowled. The boy could bleed. He must be alive, after all.

"Wake up, Yankee," said Joseph Paradine, and stirred the blue flank with his foot. The flesh yielded, but did not stir otherwise. He turned the body over. A vacant pink face stared up out of eyes that were fixed, but bright. Not death—and not sleep.

Paradine had seen men in a swoon who looked like that. Yet even swooners breathed, and there was not a hair's line of motion under the dimmed brass buttons.

"Funny," thought Paradine, not meaning that he was amused. He walked on, because there was nothing left to do. Just beyond that first fallen lad lay the rest of the patrol, still in the diamond-shaped formation they must have held when awake and erect. One man lay at the right side of the street, another opposite him at the left. The corporal was in the center and, to his rear, another private.

The corporal was, or had been, an excitable man. His hands clutched his musket firmly, his lips drew back from gritted teeth, his eyes were narrow instead of staring. A bit of awareness seemed to remain upon the set, stubbly face. Paradine forbore to prod him with the saber, but stooped and twitched up an eyelid. It snapped back into its squint. The corporal, too, lived but did not move.

"Wake up," Paradine urged him, as he had urged the boy. "You aren't dead." He straightened up, and stared at the more distant and numerous blue bodies in their fallen ranks. "None of you are dead!" he protested at the top of his lungs, unable to beat down his hysteria. "Wake up, Yankees!"

He was pleading with them to rise, even though he would be doomed if they did.

"Yee-hee!" he yelled. "You're all my prisoners! Up on your feet!"

"Yo're wastin' yore breath, son."

Paradine whirled like a top to face this sudden quiet rebuke.

A man stood in the front yard of a shabby house opposite, leaning on a picket fence. Paradine's first impression was of noble and vigorous old age, for a mighty cascade of white beard covered the speaker's chest, and his brow was fringed with thick cottony hair. But next moment Paradine saw that the brow was strangely narrow and sunken, that the mouth in the midst of its hoary ambush hung wryly slack, and that the eyes were bright but empty, like cheap imitation jewels.

The stranger moved slowly along the fence until he came to a gate. He pushed it creakily open, and moved across the dusty road toward Paradine. His body and legs were meager, even for an old man,

and he shook and shuffled as though extremely feeble. His clothing was a hodgepodge of filthy tatters.

At any rate, he was no soldier foe. Paradine holstered his revolver, and leaned on his saber. The bearded one came close, making slow circuit of two fallen soldiers that lay in his path. Close at hand, he appeared as tall and gaunt as a flagstaff, and his beard was a fluttering white flag, but not for truce.

"I spoke to 'em," he said, quietly but definitely, "an' they dozed off like they was drunk."

"You mean these troops?"

"Who else, son? They come marchin' from them hills to the north. The folks scattered outa here like rabbits—all but me. I waited. An'—I put these here Yanks to sleep."

HE REACHED under his veil of beard, apparently fumbling in the bosom of his ruined shirt. His brown old fork of a hand produced a dingy book, bound in gray paper.

"This does it," he said.

Paradine looked at the front cover. It bore the woodcut of an owl against a round moon.

The title was in black capitals:

JOHN GEORGE HOHMAN'S
POW-WOWS
OR
LONG LOST FRIEND

"Got it a long time back, from a Pennsylvany witch-man."

Paradine did not understand, and was not sure that he wanted to. He still wondered how so many fighting-men could lie stunned.

"I thought ye was a Yank, an' I'd missed ye somehow," the quiet old voice informed him. "That's a Yank sojer suit, hain't it? I was goin' to read ye some sleep words, but ye give the yell, an' I knew ye was secesh."

Paradine made a gesture, as though to brush away a troublesome fly. He must investigate further. Up the street he walked, among the prone soldiers.

It took him half an hour to complete his survey, walking from end to end of that unconscious host. He saw infantry, men and officers sprawling together in slack comradeship; three batteries of Parrott guns, still coupled to their limbers, with horses slumped in their harness and riders and drivers fallen in the dust beneath the wheels; a body of cavalry—it should have been scouting out front, thought Paradine professionally—all down and still, like a whole parkful of equestrian statues overturned; wagons; and finally, last of the procession save for a prudently placed rearguard, a little clutter of men in gold braid. He approached the oldest and stoutest of these, noting the two stars on the shoulder straps—a major general.

Paradine knelt, unbuttoned the frock coat, and felt in the pockets. Here were papers. The first he unfolded was the copy of an order:

General T. F. Kottler,
Commanding ——— Division, USA.

General:
You will move immediately, with your entire force, taking up a strong defensive position in the Channow Valley. . . .

This, then, was Kottler's Division. Paradine estimated the force as five thousand bluecoats, all veterans by the look of them, but nothing that his own comrades would have feared. He studied the wagon-train hungrily. It was packed with food and clothing, badly needed by the Confederacy. He would do well to get back and report his find. He turned, and saw that the old man with the white beard had followed him along the street.

"I reckon," he said to Paradine, in tones of mild reproach, "ye think I'm a-lyin' about puttin' these here Yanks to sleep."

Paradine smiled at him, as he might have smiled at an importunate child. "I didn't call you a liar," he temporized, "and the Yankees are certainly in dreamland. But I think there must be some natural explanation for——"

"Happen I kin show ye better'n tell ye," cut in the dotard. His paper-bound book was open in his scrawny hands. Stooping close to it, he began rapidly to mumble something. His voice suddenly rose, sounded almost young:

"Now, stand there till I tell ye to move!"

Paradine, standing, fought for explanations. What was happening to him could be believed, was even logical. Mesmerism, scholars called it, or a newer name, hypnotism.

As a boy he, Paradine, had amused himself by holding a hen's beak to the floor and drawing a chalk line therefrom. The hen could never move until he lifted it away from that mock tether. That was what now befell him, he was sure. His muscles were slack, or perhaps tense; he could not say by the feel. In any case, they were immovable. He could not move eye. He could not loosen grip on his saber-hilt. Yes, hypnotism. If only he rationalized it, he could break the spell.

But he remained motionless, as though he were the little iron figure to which his horse was tethered, yonder at the foot of the street.

The old man surveyed him with a flicker of shrewdness in those bright eyes that had seemed foolish.

"I used only half power. Happen ye kin still hear me. So listen:

"My name's Teague. I live down yon by the crick. I'm a witch-man, an' my pappy was a witch-man afore me. He was the seventh son of a seventh son—an' I was *his* seventh son. I know conjer stuff—black an' white, forrard an' back'ard. It's my livin'.

"Folks in Channow make fun o' me, like they did o' my pappy when he was livin' but they buy my charms. Things to bring love or hate, if they hanker fer 'em. Cures fer sick hogs an' calves. Sayin's to drive away fever. All them things. I done it fer Channow folks all my life."

IT WAS a proud pronouncement, Paradine realized. Here was the man diligent in business, who could stand before kings. So might speak a statesman who had long served his constituency, or the editor of a paper that had built respectful traditions, or a doctor who had guarded a town's health for decades, or a blacksmith who took pride in his lifetime of skilled toil. This gaffer who called himself a witch-man considered that he had done service, and was entitled to respect and gratitude. The narrator went on, more grimly:

"Sometimes I been laffed at, an' told to mind my own bizness. Young 'uns has hooted, an' throwed stones. I coulda cursed 'em—but I didn't. Nossir. They's my friends an' neighbors—Channow folks. I kep' back evil from 'em."

The old figure straightened, the white beard jutted forward. An exultant note crept in.

"But when the Yanks come, an' everybody run afore 'em but me, I didn't have no scruples! Invaders! Tyrants! Thievin' skunks in blue!" Teague sounded like a recruiting officer for a Texas regiment. "I didn't owe them nothin'—an' here in the street I faced 'em. I dug out this here little book, an' I read the sleep words to 'em. See," and the old hands gestured sweepingly, "they sleep till I tell 'em to wake. *If* I ever tell 'em!"

Paradine had to believe this tale of occult patriotism. There was nothing else to believe in its place. The old man who

called himself Teague smiled twinklingly.

"Yo're secesh. Ye fight the Yanks. If ye'll be good, an' not gimme no argyments, blink yore left eye."

Power of blinking returned to that lid, and Paradine lowered it submissively.

"Now ye kin move again—I'll say the words."

He leafed through the book once more, and read out: "Ye horsemen an' footmen, conjered here at this time, ye may pass on in the name of . . ." Paradine did not catch the name, but it had a sound that chilled him. Next instant, motion was restored to his arms and legs. The blood tingled sharply in them, as if they had been asleep.

Teague offered him a hand, and Paradine took it. That hand was froggy cold and soft, for all its boniness.

"Arter this," decreed Teague, "do what I tell ye, or I'll read ye somethin' ye'll like less." And he held out the open book significantly.

Paradine saw the page—it bore the number 60 in one corner, and at its top was a heading in capitals: TO RELEASE SPELL-BOUND PERSONS. Beneath were the lines with which Teague had set him in motion again, and among them were smudged inky marks.

"You've crossed out some words," Paradine said at once.

"Yep. An' wrote in others." Teague held the book closer to him.

Paradine felt yet another chill, and beat down a desire to turn away. He spoke again, because he felt that he should.

"It's the name of God that you've cut out, Teague. Not once, but three times. Isn't that blasphemy? And you've written in——"

"The name of somebody else." Teague's beard ruffled into a grin. "Young feller, ye don't understand. This book was wrote full of the name of God. That name is good—fer some things. But fer curses an' deaths an' overthrows, sech as this 'un—well, I changed the names an' spells by puttin' in that other name ye saw. An' it works fine." He grinned wider as he surveyed the tumbled thousands around them, then shut the book and put it away.

Paradine had been well educated. He had read Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus,* at the University of Virginia, and some accounts of the New England witchcraft cases. He could grasp, though he had never been called upon to consider, the idea of an alliance with evil. All he could reply was:

"I don't see more than five thousand Yankees in this town. Our boys can whip that many and more, without any spells."

Teague shook his old head. "Come on, let's go an' set on them steps," he invited, pointing.

The two walked back down the street, entered a yard and dropped down upon a porch. The shady leaves above them hung as silent as chips of stone. Through the fence-pickets showed the blue lumps of quiet that had been a fighting division of Federals. There was no voice, except Teague's.

"Ye don't grasp what war means, young feller. Sure, the South is winnin' now—but to win, men must die. Powder must burn. An' the South hain't got men an' powder enough to keep it up."

If Paradine had never thought of that before, neither had his superiors, except possibly General Lee. Yet it was plainly true.

Teague extended the argument:

"But if every Yank army was put to sleep, fast's it got in reach—what then? How'd ye like to lead yore own army into Washington an' grab ole Abe Lincoln right outen the White House? How'd ye like to be the second greatest man o' the South?"

"Second greatest man?" echoed Paradine breathlessly, forgetting to fear. He was being tempted as few chivalric ideal-

ists can endure. "Second only to—Robert E. Lee!"

The name of his general trembled on his lips. It trembles to this day, on the lips of those who remember. But Teague only snickered, and combed his beard with fingers like skinny sticks.

"Ye don't ketch on yet. Second man, not to Lee, but to—me, Teague! Fer I'd be a-runnin' things!"

Paradine, who had seen and heard so much to amaze him during the past hour, had yet the capacity to gasp. His saber was between his knees, and his hands tightened on the hilt until the knuckles turned pale. Teague gave no sign. He went on:

"I hain't never got no respect here in Channow. Happen it's time I showed 'em what I can do." His eyes studied the windrows of men he had caused to drop down like sickled wheat. Creases of proud triumph deepened around his eyes. "We'll do all the Yanks this way, son. Yore gen-'rals hain't never done nothing like it, have they?"

His generals—Paradine had seen them on occasion. Jackson, named Stonewall for invincibility, kneeling in unashamed public prayer; Jeb Stuart, with his plume and his brown beard, listening to the clang of Sweeney's banjo; Hood, who outcharged even his wild Texans; Polk blessing the soldiers in the dawn before battle, like a prophet of brave old days; and Lee, the gray knight, at whom Teague had laughed. No, they had never done anything like it. And, if they could, they would not.

"Teague," said Paradine, "this isn't right."

"Not right? Oh, I know what ye mean. Ye don't like them names I wrote into the *Pow-Wows,* do ye? But ain't everything fair in love an' war?"

TEAGUE laid a persuasive claw on the sleeve of Paradine's looted jacket. "Listen this oncet. Yore idee is to win with sword an' gun. Mine's to win by conjurin'. Which is the quickest way? The easiest way? The only way?"

"To my way of thinking, the only way is by fair fight. God," pronounced Paradine, as stiffly as Leonidas Polk himself, "watches armies."

"An' so does somebody else," responded Teague. "Watches—an' listens. Happen he's listenin' this minit. Well, lad, I need a sojer to figger army things fer me. You joinin' me?"

Not only Teague waited for Paradine's answer. . . . The young trooper remembered, from *Pilgrim's Progress,* what sort of dealings might be fatal. Slowly he got to his feet.

"The South doesn't need that kind of help," he said flatly.

"Too late to back out," Teague told him.

"What do you mean?"

"The help's been asked fer already, son. An' it's been given. A contract, ye might call it. If the contract's broke—well, happen the other party'll get mad. They can be worse enemies 'n Yanks."

Teague, too, rose to his feet. "Too late," he said again. "That power can sweep armies away fer us. But if we say no—well, it's been roused up, it'll still sweep away armies—Southern armies. Ye think I shouldn't have started sech a thing? But I've started it. Can't turn back now."

Victory through evil—what would it become in the end? Faust's story told, and so did the legend of Gilles de Retz, and the play about Macbeth. But there was also the tale of the sorcerer's apprentice, and of what befell him when he tried to reject the force he had thoughtlessly evoked.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked, through lips that muddled the words.

"Good lad, I thought ye'd see sense. First off, I want yore name to the bargain. Then me 'n' you can lick the Yanks."

Lick the Yankees! Paradine remembered

a gayly profane catch-phrase of the Confederate camp: "Don't say Yankee, say damned Yankee." But what about a damned Confederacy? Teague spoke of the day of victory; what of the day of reckoning?

What payment would this ally ask in the end?

Again Faust popped into his mind. He imagined the Confederacy as a Faust among the nations, devil-lifted, devil-nurtured—and devil-doomed, by the connivance of one Joseph Paradine.

Better disaster, in the way of man's warfare.

The bargain was offered him for all the South. For all the South he must reject, completely and finally.

Aloud he said: "My name? Signed to something?"

"Right here'll do."

Once more Teague brought forth the *Pow-Wows* book which he had edited so strangely. "Here, son, on this back page—in blood."

Paradine bowed his head. It was to conceal the look in his eyes, and he hoped to look as though he acquiesced. He drew his saber, passed it to his left hand. Upon its tip he pressed his right forefinger. A spot of dull pain, and a drop of blood creeping forth, as had appeared on the wrist of the ensorcelled boy lying yonder among the Yankees in the street.

"That'll be enough to sign with," approved Teague.

He flattened out the book, exposing the rear flyleaf. Paradine extended his reddened forefinger. It stained the rough white paper.

"J for Joseph," dictated Teague. "Yep, like that——"

PARADINE galvanized into action. His bloody right hand seized the book, wrenching it from the trembling fingers. With the saber in his left hand, he struck.

A pretty stroke for even a practised swordsman; the honed edge of the steel found the shaggy side of Teague's scrawny neck. Paradine felt bone impeding his powerful drawing slash. Then he felt it no longer. The neck had sliced in two, and for a moment Teague's head hung free in the air, like a lantern on a wire.

The bright eyes fixed Paradine's, the mouth fell open in the midst of the beard, trying to speak a word that would not come. Then it fell, bounced like a ball, and rolled away. The headless trunk stood on braced feet, crumpling slowly. Paradine stepped away from it, and it collapsed upon the steps of the house.

Again there was utter silence in the town and valley of Channow. The blue soldiers did not budge where they lay. Paradine knew that he alone moved and breathed and saw—no, not entirely alone. His horse was tethered at the end of the street.

He flung away his saber and ran, ashamed no more of his dread. Reaching the gray, he found his fingers shaky, but he wrenched loose the knotted reins. Flinging himself into the saddle, he rode away across the level and up the slope.

The pines sighed gently, and that sound gave him comfort after so much soundlessness.

He dismounted, his knees swaying as though their tendons had been cut, and studied the earth. Here were the footprints of Dauger's horse. Here also was a cleft stick, and in it a folded scrap of paper, a note. He lifted it, and read the penciled scrawl:

> Dear frend Joe, you ant com back so I left like you said to bring up the boys. I hope your alright & if the Yankies have got you well get you back.
>
> L. Dauger.

His comrades were coming, then, with gun and sword. They expected to meet

Union soldiers. Paradine gazed back into the silence-brimmed valley, then at what he still held in his right hand. It was the *Pow-Wows* book, marked with a wet capital J in his own blood.

What had Teague insisted? The one whose name had been invoked would be fatally angry if his help were refused. But Paradine was going to refuse it.

He turned to Page 60. His voice was shaky, but he managed to read aloud:

"Ye horsemen and footmen, conjured here at this time, ye may pass on in the name of"—he faltered, but disregarded the ink-blotting, and the substituted names—"of Jesus Christ, and through the word of God."

Again he gulped, and finished. "Ye may now ride on and pass."

From under his feet burst a dry, startling thunder of sound, a partridge rising to the sky. Farther down the slope a crow took wing, cawing querulously. Wind wakened in the Channow Valley; Paradine saw the distant trees of the town stir with it. Then a confused din came to his ears, as though something besides wind was wakening.

After a moment he heard the notes of a bugle, shrill and tremulous, sounding an alarm.

Paradine struck fire, and built it up with fallen twigs. Into the hottest heart of it he thrust Teague's book of charms. The flame gnawed eagerly at it, the pages crumpled and fanned and blackened with the heat. For a moment he saw, standing out among charred fragments, a blood-red J, his writing, as though it fought for life. Then it, too, was consumed, and there were only ashes. Before the last red tongue subsided, his ears picked up a faint rebel yell, and afar into the valley rode Confederate cavalry.

He put his gray to the gallop, got down the slope and joined his regiment before it reached the town. On the street a Union line was forming. There was hot, fierce fighting, such as had scattered and routed many a Northern force.

But, at the end of it, the Southerners ran like foxes before hounds, and those who escaped counted themselves lucky.

IN HIS later garrulous years, Joseph Paradine was apt to say that the war was lost, not at Antietam or Gettysburg, but at a little valley hamlet called Channow. Refusal of a certain alliance, he would insist, was the cause; that offered ally fought thenceforth against the South.

But nobody paid attention, except to laugh or to pity. So many veterans go crazy.

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"She reached her arms toward me."

Apprentice Magician

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

A whimsical weird story about the lovely image with the lion's head, and the reason why conjuring spells are all in dead languages—
by the author of "The Stranger from Kurdistan"

THE minute I saw Uncle Simon, I knew there wasn't a chance of fooling him about anything. Instead of being tall, like the rest of us Buckners, he was short. His face was pink and babyish, and the hair showing around the edges of his black skull-cap was just like cotton. You can't ever fool these kind and

simple-looking people, not when they've lived as long as Uncle Simon.

"So you're Duke's boy, Panther Warfield Buckner?" He looked halfway solemn, and halfway amused. "And you came all the way to California to see me. Well, well. That's nice."

We hadn't written him, but he acted like he'd expected me.

He was Grandfather's brother, but we always called him Uncle when we talked about how rich he was. Dad and the rest of the folks sent me to get friendly with Uncle Simon so he'd will me his property instead of giving it to a college or something. They figured since I'd been to high school I was bright enough to do that, but here I was, feeling doubtful already.

Uncle Simon reminded me of the sheriff who raided Grandfather's still, back home in Georgia. I hadn't been born more than a couple days when that happened, but I saw him later. Then I was old enough to understand that Grandfather wearing stripes so much of the time was why I was named Panther.

"Hit's because the Buckners don't never change their stripes," Dad would say, somewhat sourly.

The preacher said, "Duke, probably you're thinking of the leopard that doesn't change his *spots*."

But Dad was stubborn. Nobody could tell him anything about the Scriptures. He wouldn't read, and Grandfather couldn't, and so here I was, with Uncle Simon smiling to himself about my name.

"It's been mighty lonesome, Panther," he said, looking up suddenly. "I'm getting pretty close to ninety and I've got a lot of work to do. Maybe you can help me."

"I reckon I can, Uncle Simon." When a man is near ninety, he won't have long to work a fellow to death. "I can skin mules, and I can run a tractor, like some of these up-to-date plantations have."

"Do you suppose you can run a still?"

"No, sir, but I can learn; though Dad said times were changing, and I ought to be a preacher or lawyer or something, which is why I went to high school."

He looked at me and smiled like he was enjoying a good joke. "So instead of sending you to college, he sent you out here to see his Uncle Simon."

I got red and began fumbling with the arms of my chair. The room was so big I could hardly see the further end of it, and the carpets looked like silk; deep and soft and shiny. A man smart enough to get all those things and a big house was too much for me. I said, "Uh—yes, sir."

Uncle Simon's eyes bored right through me, even though he was smiling and friendly. I was wondering why his voice was so young. It wasn't particularly deep, but it didn't crack like Grandfather's.

"You came out here to inherit my money."

I was sweating. I let out a deep breath, and brushed my cowlick from between my eyes, though it never does any good. Uncle Simon went on, "Well, I need an apprentice to learn my business. Do you know any Latin?"

I nodded, having spent three years on Latin One.

"Any Greek?"

"Yes, sir. A little," though it wasn't a thin dime's worth.

"Any Hebrew?"

There was no use trying to fool him. "What I meant was, if I'd gone to the seminary to be a preacher, I'd have learned those things."

"That's all right. It won't take you long."

"Uncle Simon," I blurted out, "what kind of a trade is this, where an apprentice has to know all those languages?"

"I'm a magician. The spells are in dead languages, or ignorant people would run around practising and hurting themselves."

It was too late to back down. So I became a magician's apprentice.

THE work was interesting, sometimes, though for a while I didn't know but what Uncle Simon was mocking me. He hadn't promised me I'd be his heir if I did my work right, and I couldn't think of any way to bring the subject up again. Whenever I'd get around to it, he'd start conjuring.

There was the time we were out in the garden. The house was inside of a high stone wall with spikes that sloped in, and some that pointed out, so getting over it from either direction was mighty near impossible unless you could fly. Uncle Simon kept the key to the gate. Anyway, we were standing about ten feet away from the live coals in the bottom of the dry swimming-pool in the yard.

My hands were blistered from chopping wood for the fire. He didn't have any help, colored or white, excepting me. It was a shame to drain that pool. And the heat of the coals was scorching the leaves of the big fig-tree. I wiped off some sweat and leaned on my rake and said, "Uncle Simon, when a man gets your age, he hadn't ought to work like you do."

"Age don't affect me like it does most folks." He sat down on a stone bench and untied his shoe laces. "Take off your shoes!"

I guess I looked silly, but Dad taught me to mind when I was spoken to. In a minute I was blinking and barefooted. It's funny how quick you get used to wearing shoes. But another funny thing was how Uncle Simon had changed the subject. I was still figuring out another way of working up to him changing his will when he beckoned and said, "Now we're going to take a walk. Won't hurt you a bit."

"Shucks, Uncle Simon, my feet are pretty tough."

He rubbed his hands and chuckled. "We're walking in that fire. A first-class apprentice has to learn that one. You won't be burnt unless you're scared."

He didn't argue. He didn't even look back. He just climbed down the ladder and began walking barefooted across the coals. I could see the thin bits of ash crack off where his feet sunk in a little.

When I got to the bottom of the ladder, at the shallow end, I could smell the hot blast scorching the cuffs of his pants. They were frayed a bit, and it was the loose threads that curled up. But Uncle Simon didn't notice that. He made a funny humming noise, like he was singing with his teeth clenched. It made me dizzy to watch him.

The whole floor of the pool was dancing and waving up and down like a rug getting shook out. I felt like the time I drunk a mason jar of Grandfather's corn whisky. I got mad, too. Changing the subject every time I aimed to ask him about his will! Trying to mock me and make me act scared!

So I took a step—a long one. I'd seen the blacksmith pick up chunks of red-hot iron, only he dropped them real quick, and maybe that was the trick. But I pretty nearly forgot to keep on walking, I was so surprised.

My feet didn't feel hot. Just my face and hands. I was hearing music. It was heathen-sounding — deep notes that boomed, and funny little ones like someone whistling and crying at the same time. But it was the brass that made me shake all over. I was shivering, and I wanted to holler and dance and fight. Trumpets yelling, and gongs whanging like they couldn't stop if they wanted to.

The fire began to change color. It got blue and then purple. It seemed like Uncle Simon was walking down a covered bridge all roofed over with flames. A twisting hole reached way beyond the yard. I couldn't tell whether it was going up, down, or straight.

Then I saw things like the postmaster must've, when he had the DT's, only these

were so beautiful I couldn't believe it. There was a green woman, 'way off. Sometimes she had a lion's head growing right from her neck, and again, she had the prettiest human face I ever saw. She reached her arms toward me, as though she didn't see Uncle Simon at all.

I couldn't see him any more, either, and I wasn't scared. I ran toward her. The music was hitting me like a hammer now, and echoes began telling me what her name was.

THEN it all faded out. I was on the bottom of the pool, past the coals. Uncle Simon had his hand on my shoulder. "When your legs are steady enough to climb, get out," he said. "It's all-fired hot. You aren't burnt, are you?"

"Not a bit." I wasn't, though I still couldn't believe it. "Who was that green girl that was changing her face all the time?"

"What's that?" Uncle Simon looked at me narrow-eyed, and dropped his shoe. "When was this?"

"Back there, when the music started."

He lifted his black cap and rubbed his bald spot. He hadn't ever looked half as thoughtful, not even when he was giving me lessons in Hebrew and Greek. Then he smiled and said, "You did pretty good for a beginner, Panther. It's mighty near time for you to study spells and incantations."

He walked away, like he'd forgotten I was there. If Father knew how I'd missed another chance to ask about that will, he'd beat me with a harness tug. He always claimed that until I was old enough to vote, an occasional whaling was a good way to build character. I hadn't dared write to tell him I was becoming a magician, but it looked now as if I'd ought to. Uncle Simon sure was a good one.

That evening I got a real surprise. He poked his head out of the library and asked me to come in. This was the first time he ever let me see what was in back of that locked door.

"Panther," he said, "before we get through with your lessons, you're likely to get the tar scared out of you, but I think you've got backbone." He reached for a sheet of paper. "This is my new will. You get everything, though your kinfolk'll swindle you out of it soon enough. Now, tell me more about that girl."

He stuffed the will into the old-fashioned roll-top desk. The lamp that reached up out of the mess of papers and books didn't make enough light for me to see much of what was in the room, but I could feel things looking at me out of the shadows. I began telling him about the funny dress she wore, and the way her hair was fixed in a lot of long, shiny curls that hung down over her shoulders.

"She wore a crown with a snake on it?" he broke in.

"That's right. Except when she was wearing a lion's head and showing her teeth. It was just like——"

Then I sat up straight and started staring at something I'd just noticed in the far corner. I pointed. "That's her, now!"

Uncle Simon smiled as though I didn't know the half of it. He said, "That's just a statue," and snapped on another light.

It was shiny green stone. The woman was bigger than the angel over I-Will-Prevail Carter's grave, back home; only she was sitting, with her arms close to her sides, and her hands reaching to her knees. She'd been right pretty, except that it just wasn't natural, a woman having the head of a female lion.

The eyes looked 'way past me, like she was seeing something that was a million miles away, or a million years past. It made me squirm, but I couldn't look anywhere else. Finally I said, "Uncle Simon, you been worshipping graven images?"

He laughed and said, "You go to your room and get at your studies."

YOU can make a fellow look at books, but you can't make him learn a thing. Not when his mind isn't on it. And mine wasn't.

Even if Dad had stood over me with a harness tug, I'd not learned a line of that Hebrew, though I was getting so I could recite whole pages of it, out loud.

It's the funniest language. You speak some of the words from your collar-bone, and after you've been at it for an hour, your throat has cramps. But as I said, it's impressive-sounding, like when the parson pounds the pulpit and says you're going to hell sure as all get out, and almighty Gawd won't look at you whilst you're sizzling.

No, I didn't learn a single line that night. I was thinking of that green girl. Not the one that was a graven image, but the real one. I was mad now because the path of coals had been so short. If it'd been longer, I swear I'd have walked right up to her. She held her arms out to me, and I don't think she was mocking me.

It looked like Uncle Simon was interested, too. For a man his age, that wasn't quite right. I felt like a fool, the way I blatted it right out, but how was I to know he hadn't seen her? Now he knew about her, and he was foxy enough to have his way with people. Look at Grandfather, pretty near seventy, and marrying Lily Mae Carter—that's the postmaster's daughter—right under the noses of fellows her own age, when she wasn't a day over sixteen.

I didn't know just what, but I was fixing to do something. If Uncle Simon got riled at me, he'd change the will, and no telling what else he'd do to me. And on top of it all, Dad and the wagon spoke would get to work on me.

I began to get scared. You see, I was dead set on seeing that girl again. Ask her to quit pretending she had a face like a female lion, when it was plain as day that she was a woman. With that close-fitting skirt that reached pretty nearly up to her armpits, you couldn't help noticing how pretty she was, all over.

There was something funny about it all. I was getting used to magic, but Uncle Simon knew ten times as much as I did. Still and all, he was surprised when I mentioned her. He acted like I'd found something he'd been looking for and not finding. That was hard to believe, but that's how he acted.

It finally began to make sense as I sat there. He was just too old for that girl, so she'd been hiding from him. Me, I got a face like a coffin, and Dad says I look like I'm always fixing to fall over my own feet, but women don't seem to mind that at all, as long as a fellow is young.

So I planned things out. I'd find that girl and stay long enough to talk to her. Warn her, so Uncle Simon and his magic couldn't make her mind him. He'd get mad when it failed, but he wouldn't be able to blame me.

If I went out and built a fire, Uncle Simon'd notice that, and then where'd I be? But there was another way. I'd learned some powerful spells; only I'd never tried any of them except when he was around to see I didn't get into trouble. And he wouldn't let me call up evil spirits. Sometimes they raise sand, and if a fellow even looks like he's scared, they finish him in a wink. That sort of thing is for master magicians.

But shucks, that green girl wasn't anything evil.

I SNEAKED out of my room, and went toward the library. It was late, and Uncle Simon was snoring upstairs. I didn't have to go out into the yard to try a window. He'd forgotten to lock the door. When a man gets close to ninety, he's absent-minded at times.

There were some books and stuff on his desk that hadn't been there when I left him. One of them had a snakeskin bind-

ing, and the title was on the back cover. The Hebrews started on the last page, instead of the first. The idea is to fool people that are used to ordinary books. They start reading backward and it don't make sense —not even to a magician.

I hadn't gone over more than half a page when I was so happy I nearly hollered out loud. It was all about the girl from the fire. There were notes in Uncle Simon's handwriting, and dates, and everything. He'd been trying for years and he hadn't as much as seen her.

And while I was in my room, he'd been trying to figure out how I'd met her, when I walked over the coals. I sat down and put my feet on his desk. My heart was going thump-thumpety-thump, like the Odd Fellows Band in Athens. For a second, I was so dizzy I nearly fell out of the swivel chair. That was when I learned who I'd been talking to, and what she was.

She was a *goddess*. Her name was Sekhmet, and she wore the face of a female lion to scare ignorant folks. She lived in the Land of Fire, and her disguise mask meant, fire is dangerous—don't monkey around unless you know how to act.

Sekhmet was from Egypt, but ever since King Solomon married Pharaoh's daughter, the Hebrews were more or less neighborly with the Egyptians. They quit feuding, and naturally, they wrote things about each other—which I saw when I read a couple more pages.

There was a chapter in picture writing, like on the base of that green statue of Sekhmet. Of course, I couldn't make head nor tail of those hieroglyphics, but that didn't hurt at all. The book was written for Hebrew magicians, and some of them couldn't read Egyptian either. There was a line of Hebrew to explain exactly how you said each line of picture writing.

Then I began to get sore!

Uncle Simon had been mocking me right along—making me chop wood, work in the garden, just like a slave. I was his heir, only he wouldn't die. Not for hundreds of years, maybe never at all! I read it all. How fire walking, fire breathing, dealing with fire spirits burns the dust-to-dust things out of a man, and what's left can't die—providing he doesn't get killed while he's practising.

I began to see why he was hankering to talk to Sekhmet. That was the last step, the one he hadn't been able to make, not even with all his studying. Shucks, I'd be an apprentice all my life, and neither me nor any of our kinfolk would get ary a nickel of Uncle Simon's fortune!

That made me boiling mad. I got up and began cussing to myself and shaking my fist toward the ceiling, which was shivering a little from the snoring upstairs. It was so loud, I wondered if she could hear me unless I shouted.

But I went over and faced the graven image. The eyes weren't like those on General Lee's statue in the square in Marietta. They seemed to be looking and seeing. I was scared for a minute. My mouth was dry, and I couldn't pronounce the words. A lion is something that makes a man shrivel up inside when he looks at one, even if it's just carved. It's a symbol, I guess, not just an animal. But I felt better when I remembered how lovely Sekhmet was when she took off her mask.

I don't know exactly why I faced that graven image. It wasn't necessary, according to the book. The path of fire would open up, no matter where you were.

So I began to read out loud, and made motions with my hands, like it said to do. Shucks, I can't say it in English. It can't be said except in those dead languages. That's why they're dead. The people that used to speak them got killed off, practising such things and making mistakes. No wonder I was sweating and shaking when I started.

Then my voice steadied. The oak ceiling threw the sound back, like I was talking

into a well. I didn't hear Uncle Simon snoring any more. The echoes played tricks with each other, and with my ears. It's funny how pronouncing some words makes your chest and stomach shake like a busted clock-spring. You feel it all the way to your ankles when you say things exactly right.

That's how I knew I was getting the words so she could understand. I wasn't trembling a bit any more. At times I thought I must have bass drums and pipe organs in my stomach. It was nearly tearing me to pieces, but I was so happy I could have danced up and down.

Funny little lights cropped up all around the graven image, like the fires you see in swamps and graveyards at night. They seemed to be coming out of the air and crowding around. She wasn't green any more, and my eyes were getting so sharp I could see that the little bits of smooth stone had spaces betwixt them. They must have been the pieces the teacher called molecules, in the chemistry class, though that never made sense to me until right this minute.

I didn't need the book any more. I dropped it and made motions with both hands. I knew exactly what to say, and I wasn't always repeating what I'd read. The first thing I knew, you could throw your hat between those little grains of stone. No, that wasn't quite it, either. They weren't that far apart, really, only I could see between them. They hung together loosely, like a thick fog.

A shining fog it was. Trembling and twisting. It became like fire that kept a shape. Then all the flames and light made an arch, and Sekhmet was sitting there, with a woman's face, all sweet and smiling.

THE roof must have lifted when I spoke that last line. The sound in my ears was like grass fires, and howling winds and whanging cymbals. She got up from her throne. I never saw such little feet. I could have put both of them in my coat pocket. She must have worn shoes all her life, and never followed a plow or hoed tobacco. Not with those tiny hands.

And proud, too. Her nose wasn't exactly bent, but it wasn't straight. Her nostrils flared like a high-stepping horse's. She had a chin that was little and a bit pointed. It was her cheek-bones that gave her face that shape.

I just stood there and looked at her, kind of stupid. Maybe I hadn't ought to stare that way, but the dress she wore was thinner than a cambric handkerchief. Probably it was all right in private. I liked it a lot, and she saw I did. That made her smile some more.

When she spoke, it was easy to understand, though it wasn't English. Or maybe I just read her thoughts and watched her lips. She seemed to know what I was thinking, anyway.

"Listen, m'am," I said to her, all shaky and in a hurry. I had to talk quick before I forgot what I wanted to tell her. "My Uncle Simon's been muttering around about you and he's a magician and if you don't look out, the old sculpin's going to catch you and——"

I couldn't think of a polite way to say it, but women sort of understand things, just like children and cats and dogs. She up and kissed me, meaning I didn't have to tell her any more. She wasn't a flaming fog now. She was solid, and she smelled like all kinds of flowers and spices and that perfume they sell at the dime store back home.

"I can't take you into the Land of Fire," she told me. "Not tonight. You couldn't stand it. You've got to study some more. But I liked you the minute I saw you walking over the coals out in the yard. You weren't a bit afraid."

I pretty nearly laughed right out. She didn't know everything, either. I was scared silly, only I was riled at Uncle

Simon, mocking me. So I said to Sekhmet, "M'am, he's stubborn and he's smart. You'd better hide somewhere till I learn more spells, or he'll grab you and I'll get riled. Then we'll quarrel, and I wouldn't have a chance with a master magician."

"Panther," she whispered, "don't worry. Why do you suppose he's never seen me, with all the studying and practising he's done? I promise you, I won't let him into the Land of Fire."

"Couldn't he sneak in?" I was worried about that.

She sighed, and her eyes were sort of sad. Then she smiled, and this time she showed her teeth, just for a second. I was glad she was looking past me when she did that. Somehow, it was like a cat thinking about something to eat.

Sekhmet looked back at me, and now she was sweet again. But all of a sudden, there was a gosh-awful crackling and roaring, and fire spinning like a pinwheel. I felt like someone had hit me over the head with a maul, and I thought I was looking right into the sun.

I tried to grab Sekhmet to go with her, but she wasn't there. My hands were empty, and I stumbled to the floor. Then I heard Uncle Simon's voice, and I got up to my knees. But I was so dizzy I grabbed at the green statue. It was all solid again, and awfully hot. Sekhmet was gone.

"You young fool," Uncle Simon said, "get on your feet."

He had a razor strop and I thought he was going to whale me. His face was pink, but it wasn't babyish, and his eyes weren't kind. He was downright sore, and if I hadn't been one of the family, I know he'd have killed me or tried to. I looked at him, but didn't know what to say.

"It's lucky I came along and stopped that spell. Do you know if you'd read another line, you might have been burned to a cinder and the whole house along with you?"

"No, sir."

"What's more," he went on, "you got that girl on the brain. I knew you had, so I pretended I was snoring, and I left that book out, on purpose, to see if you'd sneak in to practise."

Uncle Simon was smart, and I was a plain fool. He'd been listening to everything. Nothing was a secret now. He hefted the razor strop like he was going to larrup me. Then he smiled, sort of sour, and he said, "I'm not whipping you, though your father would, if he knew you weren't minding me. But if you don't do what I say, I'll just kick you out of the house, and you can go back home and then see what happens."

Talking to Sekhmet had done something funny to me. I'd never dared talk back. Not until this minute. Then I shook my fist and took a step forward. "By heck," I hollered, "you can't boss me around even if you are my dad's uncle! Maybe I'm not twenty-one, but I'm grown up and there ain't anybody going to whale me. I don't want your damn money. None of us do!"

He backed away, looked puzzled, and he let the razor strop hang along his leg. I felt kind of ashamed. He was an old man.

Then Uncle Simon said, "You be a good boy, Panther. You've been ambitious and hard-working. You're not as dumb as you look, and I've been thinking of making you my partner."

"You mean, I'll be a master magician, and not an apprentice?"

You see, I wasn't as dumb as I looked. After what Sekhmet told me about practising some more, I wasn't going to lose such a good chance.

"That's right, Panther." He picked up the book I'd dropped and set it on the table. He sort of smiled to himself and nodded. Then he said, "You go to bed now, while I think about this. You've got to be initiated before you become a master magician."

"You mean, fasting and meditating and all that?"

He nodded and pointed to the door.

I WENT to my room. He was awfully foxy, and I wasn't quite sure if I had fooled him. But maybe he didn't think I knew I was pretty close to being a master magician already. Shucks, you don't always have to be initiated. Some people can skip a grade. I heard of them doing that at school.

One thing I was certain of. He didn't allow for me having read as much as I really had. That was because I hadn't let on about knowing that if you practise fire-walking and the like, you live for ages and ages and maybe never do die. You see, he'd figured I'd be so set on talking to Sekhmet that I wouldn't read further than the first couple pages.

But it would end up in a fight. I knew that. I felt kind of sorry. He was a nice fellow when he wasn't unreasonable about Sekhmet. Just like my grandfather, fixing to shoot the young fellows who were playing up to Lily Mae.

I studied like all get out. Once in a while, I used to sit there, tired and dizzy, wondering what the folks back home would say if they could see me conjuring. But what'd really open their eyes was where Uncle Simon's money came from. He just up and made gold bars out of the air, or mud, or something.

I found that out when some revenue men came in to find out where he got it. He said, "Gentlemen, I'll show you," and he did. They came out looking goggle-eyed and muttering.

One of them said, "But you can t do this, Mr. Buckner. You'll wreck the whole Government, flooding the treasury."

"No law agin it," Uncle Simon answered. He winked, and jabbed him in the ribs.

"Listen, bub. When a man gets to be my age, he has sense enough to know that too much of a good thing is worse than not enough. You suppose I'd make so much gold you could use it for paving, instead of asphalt? *You* might, but I wouldn't."

"Mr. Buckner," the other one said, foxy-like, "someone's going to break in here and steal the recipe, and he might get piggish. How about putting the paper in a bank?"

Uncle Simon laughed right out. "The recipe isn't written down. I carry it in my head. And you young fellows better not snitch that bar you seized, or I'll tell the chief revenue man on you."

That's the kind of man I was dealing with. Those revenue fellows had been to college, and they were about as stupid as foxes, and they couldn't do a thing with my uncle. I reckon he really didn't have the recipe written down on paper.

But most of the time, I was too busy to sit there and wonder about the home folks. You know, a fellow just gets used to being a magician. And I was learning faster than Uncle Simon suspected. I played dumb, which was easy.

I naturally couldn't have picked up so many tricks by just studying. Sekhmet was telling me things.

She wasn't speaking in my ear. She was whispering into my mind. I never saw her, never heard her, though once in a while I could almost smell her. That sweet stuff she wore in her hair. It must have been what they called frankincense and such-like in the Sunday school lessons. From Arabia. Like the Queen of Sheba sent King Solomon. I was getting so I knew more than the preacher back home.

But I had to hurry up. Uncle Simon was fixing to play a dirty trick, making me do all the work, and helping him conjure, and then never dying nor giving his kinfolks any gold bars. He said the stuff isn't good for people who don't work for it, unless

they're magicians. I knew I had to move fast.

This time I climbed out of my window and took the book with me, along with a little flashlight. I knew now I didn't have to stand and look at the graven image. Sekhmet would open the road to the Land of Fire no matter where I was, as long as I said the right words. I didn't even have to holler the words. Just as long as I held my mouth right, they'd be good at a whisper.

So I went to the far corner of the big yard, where the old stable was. It stood crosswise of the house and close to the back of it.

I SET the flashlight on a sill where it would shine on the book and then I started reading. The reason I needed it at all was because it had directions on what to do when you get 'way into the Land of Fire. In case Sekhmet didn't show up then and there, I'd have to know what to say to the fire spirits. Magic is just like conjuring away warts, or making a neighbor's cow go dry, back home, only it's a lot more serious.

The difference is, a magician can get himself killed, if he makes a mistake. But he doesn't have to wait for the dark of the moon, nor sit around in graveyards.

I began reading. It happened faster this time. First a little spinning spot of light like a whirlpool in a stream. It spread, and changed colors, and all those sounds began shaking me apart. But I had learned that nobody else could hear them. Couldn't hear anything except what I was speaking, and I kept my voice low.

Sekhmet came walking down a tunnel of shivering light. It reached so far that the other end of it was small, like the inside of an ice-cream cone. Twisting and spinning. When she saw me, she began to run, with her arms reaching out. Then she got impatient, and she picked up her skirt to her knees so she could stretch her legs.

Her corkscrew curls were all blue and flaming. I knew now that the sweetness wasn't perfume. It was the smell of pure fire—the stuff lightning is made of. She was so beautiful I was almost scared. She wouldn't let me kiss her.

"We've got to hurry." She was breathing real quick, and she caught my hand. "You shouldn't have called me tonight."

Sekhmet turned around and pulled me after her. I got long legs, but I could hardly keep up. It was like being shot out of a gun. My breath was hammered right back into my teeth, and her curls reached back. "What—what—what's the matter?" I asked her.

"Your uncle's been laying for you, and he's a-chasing you with a book in his hand."

I looked back. There was Uncle Simon, laughing to himself. He was scrambling through the clouds of fire that were closing up, 'way behind us. We must have been a million miles away from the barn, and if he'd not gotten there when he did, he'd have been left. But here he was, with those short legs pumping up and down. He was waving one hand, and reading from his book while he ran. It got me worried, seeing anyone his age so spry. He was mad and happy. That's a funny way for a man to look. I guess he was riled because Sekhmet wouldn't wait for him, and glad he'd caught us in time.

Ahead I saw fires that made those in back of us look like a pack of matches. The flames had faces. They had hands. They were leaning like rushes in a wind, closing in to block the path.

And beyond them everything was dancing. The roaring and crying and twittering sounds began to have *color*. I could feel the flames reaching into me. I was part of them now, and they wouldn't kill me. It was like being full of corn whisky and going to a camp meeting and being struck by lightning, all at once.

But Uncle Simon was right on our heels. Short legs weren't stopping him. Sekhmet

was sinking knee-deep in purple fire. She was choking for breath. And all of a sudden, I sobered up and noticed my feet were getting heavy. I stumbled.

She wiggled herself clear of the swamp of flame that was clogging our legs. She reached out and tried to pull me up. Uncle Simon was roaring at us.

"Get your hands off that girl, or you'll drown in fire! You young squirt, maybe you can open the road, but I followed you and you got not a chance. Not with me inside."

Sekhmet looked like she was going to cry. She was panting and pulling, but it didn't do any good. I was just making her sink deeper. And the fires we'd been running toward were crowding forward something awful, like they were mad at us.

"Don't get scared," she screamed. "I can take care of myself."

But I knew she couldn't. Uncle Simon had a trick that wasn't in the books. He was so close now that I could see the picture-writing on the paper he had. He was giving me one chance to shut up before he began singing an incantation in Egyptian.

"He'll call Osiris and all the other gods!" Sekhmet moaned. "He knows their right names, and they'll help him against me."

Then I lost my head. I pulled my hand away from Sekhmet and began reading. I shouted him down, and anyway, he was too surprised to make a sound. It was like when my dad up and knocked Grandfather down to prove he'd grown up.

What I did was read my spell backward.

All the banked-up flames began pouring out like I'd knocked the bottom from a barrel. The whole Land of Fire and everything in it came a-roaring. It tumbled me over and over. For a second I thought I was dead. I couldn't see and couldn't hear and couldn't smell anything.

The next thing I knew, I was sitting against the high wall, all doubled up and feeling busted to pieces. I didn't know but what a couple of mules had cut loose and kicked me silly.

The barn and the house were blazing. You'd have thought someone had doused them with gasoline and touched it off all over at once. I ran around, yelling for my uncle and Sekhmet, but the fire just howled and crackled.

Maybe I did say you couldn't get over that wall without flying. I didn't have wings, but I made it. My hands were all torn and my pants ripped, and I fell so hard I couldn't move for a minute. I had to crawl toward the road. And the smoke reached after me, and so did the blaze.

That crazy second when I made the fire go backward scared me. When a magician's scared, he loses his power. I think what really made me that way was knowing that I was finishing Uncle Simon, catching him off guard before he could fight back. It was no longer than a wink, my wanting to kill him for trying to take Sekhmet. But that kind of a thought is wrong, and makes things go wild.

I don't know why I wasn't killed, unless she got me out of it.

When people and motorcycle officers came a-helling, they allowed it was an explosion. They didn't ask me much. I looked too dumb, which was lucky.

I NEVER saw Uncle Simon again. Everything inside the wall burned to ashes. And I couldn't call Sekhmet. The books and everything were gone, and I was afraid, anyway, to try it.

We didn't inherit Uncle Simon's money. The new will was burned, and the old one was still in the bank. So they built another college in California, and when I went home, Dad whaled me within an inch of my life for not saving the will when the house burned down.

Spawn

By P. SCHUYLER MILLER

A colossus of gold strode over the mountains, bent on conquest, and the murdered body of Nicholas Svadin, Dictator of Europe, rose from his bier to rule the world from his palace in Budapest

PEDANTS spout glibly of probability, quibble and hedge, gulp at imagined gnats. Nothing is impossible to mathematics. Only improbable. Only *very* improbable.

Only impossibly improbable.

Earth, for example, is improbable. Planets should not logically exist, nor on existing planets life. Balances of forces are too impossibly delicate; origins too complexly coincidental. But Earth does exist—and on Earth, life.

We see Earth and we see life, or we see something, however improbable, and call it Earth and life. We forget probabilities and mathematics and live by our senses, by our common sense. Our common sense sees Earth and it sees life, and in a kind of darkened mirror it sees men—but men are utterly improbable!

Ooze to worms and worms to fishes. Fishes to frogs and frogs to lizards. Lizards to rats and rats to men, and men at last to bloated, futuristic Brains. Brains are improbable: brains and senses, and above all, common sense. Not impossible—because nothing is impossible—but so improbable that nowhere in all the improbable stars, nowhere in all the improbably empty space between the stars, is there room for other Earths and other rats and men.

Nowhere—life.

* * * * *

An improbable man is drunk. A man with improbably carrot-colored hair, with an improbably enormous nose. With a cold in that nose. With a quart of potato rot-gut to encourage the utter improbability of that cold and that nose, and of the world in general. With a plane's rudder bar under his feet and a plane's stick between his knees, and the Chilean Andes improbably gigantic underneath.

A man is tight. And coincident with that tightness he is witness to the Improbable:

FRIDAY, the 25th of July: James Arthur Donegan, thirty-odd, red-haired, American, has witnessed the Improbable.

A cliff, hard and quartz-white, softening, puddling, pulping away in a vast heaped monstrousness fat with thick ropes of gold. Raw gold, yellow in the Andean sunlight. Mother-gold, knotted in wadded worm-nests in the shining sock. Medusæ of golden fascination. Gold burning in hemp-dream arabesques in the naked cliff-face, in the white quartz that is pulping, dripping, sloughing into monstrosity.

Jim Donegan tipped his bottle high and lifted his plane out of insanity. Jim Donegan's brain reeled with the raw white fire of potato whisky and the raw yellow luster of fat gold. And with the gold a quartz cliff melting, puddling—stone into pudding—sense into nonsense. . . .

Jim Donegan tipped his bottle again and remembered to forget. Landed in Santiago. Disappeared.

* * * * *

An improbable man is sober. A thousand improbable men and a thousand even less credible women, and of them all only a hundred drunk. Only another hundred tight, or boiled, or mildly blotto. And half a thousand improbable men and women, drunk and sober, see and hear and photograph the Improbable eating whales:

WEDNESDAY, the 20th of August: Richard Chisholm, fifty, grizzled, British, has entered the Improbable in his log—has stirred one wrinkled cerebrum, accustomed to the investigation of probabilities, in unaccustomed ways.

Zoölogist Heinrich Wilhelm Sturm leaned with polished elbows on a polished rail and stared at a burnished sea. Daughter Maria Elsa Sturm leaned and stared beside him. Secretary Rudolf Walter Weltmann leaned and stared, but not at waves.

Waves lifted lazily along a great ship's flank. Waves swelled and fell unbroken with listless, oily languor of old dreams. And caught in the warm web of the sun and the malachitic waxenness of the waves a score of whales basked, rolling and blowing, under the weary eyes of Zoölogist Heinrich Sturm.

The molten, lucent fluid of the sea clotted and cooled. Color went swiftly out of it: greenstone to apple jade, jade into chrysoprase, prase into beryl spume. It folded in uneven, glistening hillocks of illogical solidity. And Zoölogist Heinrich Sturm choked on his German oaths as a score of drowsing whales fought suddenly with death!

Acres of empty sea became quivering pulp. Gray puffs of it pushed out of the waves and sank again. Horrible, avid ripples shuddered and smoothed across its sleekness. And twenty whales were caught: gigantic, blunted minnows wallowing in a pudding mold; titanic ebon microbes studding an agar bowl. Drowned by the gray-green stuff that oozed into their gullets and choked their valved blowholes! Strangled and stifled by it.

Swallowed and eaten by it!

The sound of it was unreal—the whoosh of blown breath splattering jellied ooze, the soft, glutting gurgle of flowing pulp, the single soughing sob as giant flukes pulled loose to fling aloft and smash into the rippled greenness that was darkening with the shadow of the ship.

One last sucking sigh—the fling of one mighty glistening *upsilon* against the sky—the babble of half a thousand human beings gulping breath. And Zoölogist Heinrich Sturm, staring through thick, dark lenses at the blob of gray-green jelly on his wrist, at the spatter of jelly on the deck at his feet, and swearing happily his guttural German oaths. . . .

* * * * *

A dead man lay in state.
And I was there:

FRIDAY, the 22nd of August: Nicholas Svadin lies for the third day in solemn state before the people of the world.

Nicholas Svadin, Dictator of Mitteleuropa, lay waxen white under the heaped callas, under the August sun of Budapest. Nicholas Svadin, son of a Slavic butcher, grandson of German führers, lay with six soft-nosed bullets in his skull and breast. Nicholas Svadin, whose genius for government had won the loyalty instead of the hatred of nations, whose greed had fed on the conflict of languages and races, whose shadow had covered Europe from the Volga to the Rhine. Nicholas Svadin, who had held all Europe under his humane tyranny save for the bickering fringe of Latin states and the frozen, watchful

silence of the Anglo-Scandinavian confederacy.

Nicholas Svadin, dead in the August sun, with all Europe trembling in metastable balance under the fast-unfolding wings of Chaos.

And four men were the world. And four men were afraid.

They stood as they had stood when Svadin's great rolling voice burst in a bloody cough and his great body, arms upflung in the compassionate gesture of the Cross, slumped like a greasy rag on the white steps of the Peace Hall. They stood with the world before them, and the world's dead master, and the vision of the morrow brooded in their eyes.

Four men were the world: Rasmussen, bearded, blond, steel-eyed premier of Anglo-Scandia; Nasuki at his elbow, little and cunning with the age-old subtlety of the East; Gonzales, sleek, olive-skinned heir of the Neo-Latin dictator; Moorehead the American, lean and white-headed and oldest of the four. Two and two in the August sun with the sickly scent of the death-lilies in their nostrils, and I with my camera marking Time's slow march.

I marked the four where they stood by the open bier. I marked the spilling lines of mourners that flowed in black runnels through the silent streets of Budapest. I marked the priests where they came, slow-treading with the stateliness of an elder civilization.

I marked the resurrection of the dead!

Nicholas Svadin rose on his white-banked bier and stared at the world of men.

Nicholas Svadin rose with the white wax softening in his massive jowls and the round blue scar of a soft-nosed slug between his corpse's eyes. Nicholas Svadin swung his thick legs with an ugly stiffness from the bier and stood alone, alive, staring at mankind, and spoke four words—once, slowly, then again:

"I—am—Nicholas—Svadin.

"I am Nicholas Svadin!"

And men had found a god.

* * * * *

Svadin had been a man, born of woman, father of men and women, the greatest Earth had known. His genius was for mankind, and he enfolded humanity in his kindly arms and was the father of a world.

Svadin was a man, killed as men are killed, but on the third day he rose from his bed of death and cried his name aloud for the world to hear.

Svadin the man became Svadin the god.

I photographed the world-assembly at Leningrad when Svadin called together the scientists of the Earth and gave them the world to mold according to their liking. I marked the gathering in America's halls of Congress when the rulers of the world gave their nations into his bloodless hands and received them again, reborn into a new order of democracy. I watched, and my camera watched, as the world poured itself into these new-cut patterns of civilization and found them good. And then, because men are men and even a Golden Age will pall at last, I turned to other things:

A bathysphere torn from its cable in mid-deep.

Fishing-fleets returning with empty holds after weeks and months at sea.

Eels gone from their ancient haunts, and salmon spawning in dozens where once streams had been choked with their lusting bodies.

Cattleships lost in mid-Atlantic, and then a freighter, and another, gone without a trace.

Two men and a girl whose names were on the rolls of every ship that crossed and recrossed the haunted waters of the North Atlantic.

And from the South vague rumors of a god.

MIAMI'S sun-bathed beaches were black with human insects. Miami's tropic night throbbed with the beat of music and the sway and glide of dancers. Maria Elsa Sturm glided and swayed in the strong, young arms of Rudolf Weltmann and laughed with her night-blue eyes and poppy lips, but Heinrich Sturm stood alone in the star-strewn night and stared broodingly at the sleeping sea. Maria basked in the smoldering noonday sun, a slender golden flame beside the swarthy handsomeness of her companion, but the old masked eyes of Heinrich stared beyond her beauty at the sea.

Long waves swelled sleepily against the far blue of the Gulf Stream and sank and swelled again and creamed in tepid foam along the sands. Gay laughter rippled and prismatic color played with kaleidoscopic lavishness under the golden sun. Wave after wave of the sea, rising and falling and rising against the sky—and a wave that did not fall!

It came as the others had come, slowly, blue-green and glistening in the sunlight. It rose and fell with the ceaseless surge of the Atlantic at its back, and rose again along the white curve of the beach. It was like a wall of water, miles in length, rushing shoreward with the speed of a running man. Men ran from it and were caught.

Spots of bright color spun in its sluggish eddies and went down. Tongues of it licked out over the warm sands, leaving them naked and bone-white, and flowed lazily back into the monstrous thing that lay and gorged in the hot sun.

It was a sea-green tumulus, vast as all ocean. It was a league-long hillock of green ooze, apple-jade-green, chrysoprase-green, gray-green of frosted flint. It was a thing of Famine—not out of Bibles, not out of the histories of men—a thing that lay like a pestilence of the sea upon the warm, white beaches of Miami, black with humanity running, screaming, milling—a thing that was greedy and that fed!

Tatters of bright rag swirled in its sluggish eddies, oozed from its gelid depths; fragments of white bone, chalk-white and etched, rose and were spewed on the white sands. Arms of it flowed like hot wax, knowingly, hungrily. Veins in it, pale like clear ribbons of white jade in green translucency, ran blossom-pink, ran rose, ran crimson-red.

Maria Elsa Sturm lay in the white sand, in the warm sun, in the strong arms of swarthy Rudolf Weltmann, under the unseeing eyes of Heinrich Sturm. Zoölogist Heinrich Sturm woke to the world with horror in his eyes, horror in his brain, shrieking horror come stark into his life. Zoölogist Heinrich Sturm saw tongues of the green sea-stuff licking over Miami's bone-white sands, supping up morsels of kicking life, spewing out dead things that were not food. Zoölogist Heinrich Sturm saw the Incredible, mountain-high, suck up the golden straw that was Maria Sturm, suck up the brown, strong straw that was Rudolf Weltmann, swell like a flooding river against the sea-wall at his feet, purling and dimpling with greedy inner currents; saw it ebb and lie drowsing, relishing its prey; saw the bright, scarlet rag that had wrapped Maria Sturm oozing up out of its green horridness; saw the black rag that had clothed Rudolf; saw two white, naked skulls that dimpled its glistening surface before they were sloughed away among tide-rows of eaten bones.

League-long and hill-high the wave that was not a wave lay glutting on young flesh, supping up hot blood. League-long and hill-high, with the little insect myriads of mankind running and screaming, standing and dying; with the buzzing wings of mankind circling over it and men's little weapons peppering at its vast, full-fed imperturbability. Bombs fell like grain from a sower's fist, streaming shadows

of them raining out of the bare blue sky. Vast sound shattered the ears of gaping men, crushing in windows, shaking down ceilings, thundering with boastful vengeance.

Fountains of green jelly rose stringily; wounds like the pit of Kimberly opened and showed sea-green, shadowed depths, stirring as the sea stirs, closing as the sea closes, with no scar. Bricks crumbled in little streams from a broken cornice; glass tinkled from gaping windows; men milled and babbled and stared in fascination at Death. And Zoölogist Heinrich Sturm stood alone, a gray old rock against which the scrambling tide beat and broke, seeing only the golden body of Maria Elsa Sturm, the laughing, upturned face of Maria Elsa Sturm, the night-blue eyes and poppy lips of Maria Elsa Sturm. . . .

Long waves swelled sleepily against the far blue of the Gulf Stream, and sank and swelled again, and creamed in soft foam against the bone-white sands. Wave after wave, rising and falling and rising higher with the flooding tide. Waves rising to lap the sea-green tumulus, to bathe its red-veined monstrousness whose crimson rills were fading to pink, to gray, to lucent white. Waves laving it, tickling its monstrous palate, pleasing it mightily; waves into which it subsided and left Miami's white beaches naked for a league save for the windrows of heaped bones and the moist, bright rags that had been men's condescension to the morality of men.

Cameras ground clickingly along that league-long battlefront while Horror fed; microphones gathered the scream of the sight of Death from a thousand quavering lips—but not mine.

Men turned away, sickened, to turn and stare again with horrid fascination at the wet white windrows that were girls' bones, and men's bones, and children's—but not I.

Other eyes saw that vision of the Incredible; other lips told me of it when I asked. I did not see Zoölogist Heinrich Sturm when he turned his back on the drift of smiling skulls and went wearily with the human stream, when he paid with creased and hoarded notes the accounts of Maria Elsa Sturm, deceased, of Rudolf Walter Weltmann, deceased, of Heinrich Wilhelm Sturm.

I did not see Zoölogist Heinrich Sturm when he stepped out of the hotel with his battered suitcase, plastered with paper labels, his round black hat, his thick dark glasses, and disappeared.

No one who saw cared.

There was no one, now, to care. . . .

* * * * *

Out of the South the rumor of a god!

OUT of the Andes word of a god of Gold, stalking the mountain passes with Wrath and Vengeance smoking in his fists. A god wrathful in the presence of men and the works of men. A god vengeful of man's slavery of rock and soil and metal, jealous of man's power over the inanimable. A god growing as the mountains grow, with bursting, jutting angularities shifting, fusing, molding slowly into colossal harmonies of form and function, with growing wisdom in his golden skull and growing power in his crystal fists. A god for the weak, contemptuous of the weak but pitiless to the strong—straddling adobe huts to trample the tin-roof huddle of shacks at the lip of some gaping wound in the ancient flesh of Earth.

A god with power tangible and cruel, alien to puling doctrines of white men's love of men. A god speaking voicelessly out of the distance of things that awoke old memories, roused old grandeurs in the blood of small brown men and in other men in whose veins the blood of brown kings flowed.

A god of red justice. A god of Revolution!

A god to bring fear again to men!

In the South—Revolution. Little brown men swarming in the mountains, pouring into the valleys, hacking, clubbing, stabbing, burning. Revolution in small places without names. Revolution in mud villages with names older than America. Revolution flaming in towns named in the proud Castilian tongue—in cities where white women promenaded and white men ogled, and brown men were dust in the gutters. Revolution in Catamarca, in Tucuman, in Santiago del Estero. Revolution half a thousand miles away, in Potosi, in Cochabamba, in Quillacolla. Revolution sweeping the royal cities of the Andes—Santiago, La Paz, Lima, Quito, Bogota! Revolution stalking the upthrusting spine of a continent like a pestilence, sucking in crazed brown warriors from the *montes,* from the *pampas,* from barren deserts and steaming jungles. Blood of brown ancestors rising beneath white skins, behind blue eyes. Revolution like a flame sweeping through brown man and white and mostly-white and half-white and very-little-white and back to the brown blood of ancient, feathered kings! Guns against machetes. Bayonets against razor-whetted knives. Poison gas against poison darts.

And in their wake the tread of a god of Gold!

Revolution out of Chile, out of Argentine, into Bolivia, into Peru of the Incas. Revolution out of the hot inland trough of the Amazon, rippling through Brazil, through the Guianas, into Ecuador, into Colombia, into Venezuela. Revolution choking the ditch of Panama, heaping the bigger ditch of Managua with bleeding corpses, seething through the dank forests of Honduras, Guatemala, Yucatan. A continent overwhelmed and nothing to show why. A continent threatened, and only the whispered rumor of a god of Gold!

Men like me went to see, to hear, to tell what they had seen and heard. Men like me crept into the desolate places where Revolution had passed, and found emptiness, found a continent trampled under the running, bleeding feet of a myriad of small brown men driven by a Fear greater than the fear of Death—crushed and broken under the relentless, marching hooves of the god of Gold.

A village, then a city—a nation, then a continent—and the armies of the white nations mobilizing along the border of Mexico, in the arid mountains of the American Southwest, watching—waiting—fearing none knew what. A necklace of steel across the throat of the white man's civilization.

Repeated circumstance becomes phenomenon; repeated phenomena are law. I found a circumstance that repeated again and again, that became phenomenal, that became certainty. A man with red hair, with a bulbous nose, with a bird's knowledge of the air, and an old man, peering through thick glasses, muttering in his beard. How they came together no man knew. Where they went men could only guess. The wings of their giant plane slid down out of the sunset, rose black against the sunrise, burned silver-white in the blaze of noon. They went—they returned—and none questioned their coming or going.

War on the edge of America. War between white men and brown—and more than man behind the brown. Death rained from the sky on little brown men scattering in open deserts, on green jungles where brown men might be lurking, on rotten rock where brown men might have tunneled. Death poisoned the streams and the rock-hewn *cenotes;* death lay like a yellow fog in the arroyos and poured through gorges where brown men lay

hidden behind rocks and in crannies of the rock. Flame swept over the face of Mexico and the brown hordes scattered and gave way in retreat, in flight, in utter rout. White fury blazed where brown hatred had smoldered. Brown bodies sprawled flayed and gutted where white corpses had hung on wooden crosses, where white hearts had smoked in the noon sun and white men's blood had dribbled down over carved stone altars. Hell followed Hell.

Then from Tehuantepec a clarion challenge, checking the rout, checking the white wave of vengeance. The challenge of a god!

Planes droned in the bare blue sky over Oaxaca, riddling the mountains with death. Polite, trim generals sat and drank and talked in half a dozen languages wherever there was shade. The sun blazed down on the plaza of Oaxaca in the time of *siesta,* and the grumble of war sank to a lullaby. Then out of the mountains of the east, rolling and rocking through the naked hills, sounded the shouted challenge of the god of Gold!

I HEARD it like a low thunder in the east, and a German major at the next table muttered *"Donner!"* I heard it again. A Frenchman beside him looked up a moment from his glass. It came a third time, growling against the silence, and the roaring like the voice of Bashan in the sky, and all up and down the shaded plaza men were listening and wondering.

Far away, across the mountains in Tehuantepec, the guns began to thud and mutter, and in the radio shack behind us a telegraph key was clicking nervously. The Frenchman was listening, his lips moving. An English lieutenant strode in out of the sun, saluted, melted into the shadow of the colonnade.

Out of the East the challenge of a god!

I heard the triumphant, bull-bellied shout thundering across the ranges as the guns of Tehuantepec grumbled for the last time. I saw a light that should not be there—a mad, fanatic light—gleaming in the eyes of an officer of Spanish name, from the Mexican province of Zacatecas. The German's eyes were on him, and the Frenchman's, and those of the English subaltern, following him as he stole away. The wireless operator came out and saluted, and handed a slip of yellow paper to the Frenchman. He passed it, shrugging, to the German. A Russian came and looked over his shoulder, an Italian, an American, a Japanese, and their heads turned slowly to listen for the chuck and patter of distant guns that they would never hear again. And then, again, that voice of the mountains bellowed its triumphant challenge, stirring a cold current of dread in my veins —in the veins of all men of Oaxaca—of all men who heard it.

The victorious god of Gold shouted his challenge to Mankind, and in answer came the distant burring of a plane in the north.

It passed over us and circled for a landing outside the city. An army car raced away and returned. I knew two of the three men who climbed stiffly out of the tonneau. I saw tall, red-headed air-fiend Jim Donegan. I saw stooped, gray, boggling Zoölogist Heinrich Sturm.

I saw Nicholas Svadin, once-dead master of the world.

Svadin against the god of Gold!

Again that bull-throated, brazen thunder rolled across the ranges and I saw Svadin's blunt, hairless skull cocked sidewise, listening. Old Heinrich Sturm was listening too, and Red Jim Donegan. But I saw only Nicholas Svadin.

It was five full years since that August day in Budapest. Wax was heavy in his blue-white jowls. Wax weighted down his heavy-lidded eyes. A puckered blue hole probed his sleek white brow. His great body was soft and bloated and his

stubby fingers blue under their cropped nails. There was an acrid odor in the air, the odor that heaped callas had hidden in the sun of Budapest, that not even the stench of a thousand sweating men could hide under the sun of Mexico.

They talked together—Svadin, the generals Sturm, Red Jim Donegan of Brooklyn. Donegan nodded, went to the waiting car, disappeared into white moonlight. Soon his great silver plane droned overhead, heading into the north.

One day—two—three. We on the outside saw nothing of Svadin, but men of all nations were at work in the blazing sun and the velvet night, sawing, bolting, riveting, building a vast contrivance of wood and metal under the direction of Heinrich Sturm. Four days—five, and at last we stood at the edge of the man-made city of Oaxaca, staring at that monstrous apparatus and at the lone figure that stood beside it—Svadin. His puffed blue fingers went to the switch on its towering side, and out of that giant thing thundered the bellowed defiance of Mankind, hurled at the giant Thing that walked the ranges, bull-baiting the god of Gold!

Its vast clamor shuddered in the packed earth underfoot. Its din penetrated the wadding in our ears and drummed relentlessly against our senses. It boomed and thundered its contempt, and in answer that other voice thundered beyond the blue-tipped mountains. Hour after hour—until madness seemed certain and madness was welcome—until the sun lay low in a red sky, painting the ranges—until only Svadin and gray old Heinrich Sturm remained, watching beside their vast, insulting, defiant Voice. Then in the east a flicker of light tipped the farthest ranges!

It was a creeping diamond of light above the purple horizon. It was a needle of white fire rising and falling above the mountains, striding over valleys, vaulting the naked ridges, growing and rising higher and vaster and mightier against the shadow of the coming night. It was a pillar of scintillant flame over Oaxaca.

It was the god of Gold!

QUARTZ is rock, and quartz is jelly, and quartz is a crystal gem. Gold is metal, and gold is color, and gold is the greed of men. Beauty and fear—awe and greed—the Thing over Oaxaca was a column of crystal fires, anthropomorphic, built out of painted needle-gems, with the crimson and blue and smoky wine-hues of colloidal gold staining its jeweled torso—with veins and nerves and ducts of the fat yellow gold of Earth—with a pudding of blue quartz flowing and swelling and flexing on its stony frame. It was a giant out of mythery—a *jinni* out of hasheesh madness—a monster born of the Earth, thewed with the stuff of Earth, savagely jealous of the parasitic biped mammals whose form it aped. Its spiked hooves clashed on the mountain-tops with the clamor of avalanches. Its flail-arms swung like a flicking scourge, flaying the bare earth of all that was alive. Its skull was a crystal chalice wadded with matted gold, brain-naked, set with eyes like the blue sapphires of Burma, starred with inner light.

It roared with the thunder of grinding, tearing, grating atoms, with the sullen voice of earthquakes. It was the specter of Earth's last vengeance upon delving, burrowing, gutting little Man, the flea upon her flesh. It stood, a moment, straddling the horizon—and out of the north a plane was winging, midge-small against the watching stars. So high it was that though the sun had gone and the shadow of the Earth lay purple on the sky, its wings were a sliver of light, dwindling, climbing to that unimaginable height where the rays of the vanished sun still painted the shoulders of the god of Gold. A plane—and in its wake another, and

another—a score of whispering dots against the tropic night.

Red Jim Donegan saw the monstrous, faceless visage upturned to watch his coming. He saw the white fires chill in its moon-great eyes, saw vast arm-things forming on its formless body, like swinging ropes of crystal maces. He saw the sinews of massive yellow gold that threaded its bulk, tensing and twisting with life, and the brain of knotted gold that lay in its cupped skull like worms in a bowl of gems. He saw that skull grow vaster as his plane rushed on—mountain-vast, filling the night—saw those star-backed eyes blazing—saw the evil arms sweeping upward—then was in empty air, sprawled over vacancy, his ship driving down into that monstrous face, between the staring sapphire eyes.

He swung from a silk umbrella and saw those kraken-arms paw at the crystal skull where a flower of green flame blossomed—saw the second plane diving with screaming wings—a third beyond it—and a fourth. The air was full of the white bubbles of parachutes, sinking into the edge of night. He saw the shadow of the world's edge creeping up over that giant shape, standing spread-legged among the barren hills, a green flame burning in its golden brain, a flame eating quartz as a spark eats tinder; a flame devouring gold, sloughing away crystalline immensity in a rain of burning tears, ever deeper, ever faster, as plane after plane burst with its deadly load against that crystal mass.

In blind, mad torture the god of Gold strode over Oaxaca. Green fire fell from it like blazing snow, pocking the naked rock. One dragging hoof furrowed the rocky earth, uprooting trees, crags, houses, crushing the man-made lure that had dared it to destruction. Fragments of eaten arms crashed like a meteor-fall and lay burning in the night. A moment it towered, dying, over ruined Oaxaca, where Nicholas Svadin stood dwarfed among the shambles of broken houses, the slight, stooped form of Heinrich Sturm beside him. Then in the sky that consuming flame blazed brighter as some vital source was touched. A pillar of licking light wiped out the stars. It took one giant stride, another, and the world shook with the fall of the living mountain that crashed down out of the burning night. Among the eastern hills the fractured limbs of the colossus of the South lay strewn like sown grain, and in the rocky flank of San Felipe a pit of cold green fire ate slowly toward the heart of Earth.

One who had been a man turned away from that holocaust and vanished in the darkness: Nicholas Svadin, his dead flesh clammy with dew, his gross bulk moving with the stealthy silence of a cat, with Heinrich Sturm trotting after him through the night.

Svadin, who had met the challenge of a god of Gold—and won!

* * * * *

A Thing of the Sea—a Thing of the Earth—a Thing of Men!

Three things outrageous to Man's knowledge of himself and of his world, improbable beyond calculation, impossible if impossibility could exist. Three Things raised from the dead, from the inanimate, from the inanimable, to live, and feed, and stalk the Earth among other things that lived and ate and walked properly, probably, possibly. Three Things that sought the sovereignty of Earth—a Thing of ravening hunger, a Thing with a hate of men, and a Thing that was god-hero of all men.

One of the three lay destroyed beyond Oaxaca, and the brown men who had done its will were fugitives from vengeance. One still basked and fed in the tropic sea. And the third was Nicholas Svadin.

Rumors spread like ripples in a quiet pool. Even a god grows old. Svadin

was a god whose word was law, whose wisdom was more than human, whose brain devised strange sciences, who brought the world comfort and contentment greater than it had ever known. In life he was a genius; dead, a martyr. He rose from the dead, wearing the mark of death, and men worshipped him as a god, saw in him a god's omnipotent wisdom. He remade a world, and the world was content. He slew the giant god of Gold and men followed him like sheep. But there were others who were not impressed by gods, or men like gods, and there were rumors, whisperings, wonderings.

It was my work to hear such rumors, listen to whisperings, tell men the truth about what they wondered.

Few men were close to Svadin, but of those who were, one told strange stories. A man who in other times had made his living on the fruits of such stories. Svadin—from whom the marks of death had never vanished, though he had risen from the dead—in whose forehead the puckered mark of a bullet still showed, whose face was white with the mortician's wax, whose fingers were puffed and blue, whose body was a bloated sack, whose flesh reeked with the fluids which preserve corpses; who fed privately, on strange foods, quaffed liquids which reeked as those fluids reeked; who showed strange vacancies of memory, absences of knowledge about common things, yet was a greater genius than in life-before-death; whose only confidant was the mad zoölogist, Heinrich Wilhelm Sturm.

I heard of the strange wicker and elastic form which was made by a craftsman in Vienna and worn under his heavy, padded clothes. I heard of a woman of impressive birth who offered herself as women have—and of the dull, uncomprehending stare which drove her shivering from his chamber.

I heard of the rats that swarmed in his apartments, where no cat would stay, and of the curious devices he had erected around his bed—of the day when a vulture settled on his shoulder and others circled overhead, craning their wattled necks.

I saw Nils Svedberg, attaché of the Anglo-Scandian legation in Berlin, when he fired three Mauser bullets into the flabby paunch of the master of the world—saw too what the crowd discarded when its fanatic vengeance was sated, and children scampered home with bloody souvenirs of what had been a man. I heard Svadin's thick voice as he thanked them.

Rumors—whisperings—questions without an answer. Svadin—to some a god, born into pseudo-human form, immortal and omnipotent; to some a man, unclean, with the awakening lusts and habits of a man; to some a Thing brought out of Hell to damn Mankind.

And a Thing of the Sea, feeding in the Caribbean, in the turgid outpourings of the Amazon, along the populous coasts of Guiana and Brazil. Devil's Island a graveyard. And at last—Rio!

* * * * *

A plane with a red-haired, large-nosed American pilot cruised the coasts of South America. A worn, grayed, spectacled old man sat with him, peering down into the shallow, shadowed waters for darker shadows. They marked the slow progress of Death along the tropic coasts, and in Rio de Janeiro, Queen City of the South, the mightiest engineering masterpiece of Man was near completion.

Jim Donegan and Heinrich Sturm watched and carried word of what they saw, while Nicholas Svadin schemed and planned in Rio of the South.

RIO—rebuilt from the shell of Revolution. Rio fairer than ever, a white jewel against the green breast of Brazil. Rio with her mighty harbor strangely empty, her horseshoe beaches deserted, and

across the sucking mouth of the Atlantic a wall, with one huge gateway.

Crowds on the mountainsides, waiting. Drugged carrion bobbing in the blue waters of the harbor—slaughtered cattle from the Argentine, from America, from Australia—fish floating white-bellied in the trough of the waves—dead dogs, dead cats, dead horses—all the dead of Rio and the South, larded with opiates, rocking in the chopped blue waters of the harbor of Rio de Janeiro. And at the gateway to the sea a glistening greening of the waves—a slick mound flowing landward between the guarding walls—a gray-green horror scenting prey. A silver plane above it in the sky. A small black dot on the curved white beach.

Svadin—and the Thing of the Sea.

Food was offered, and it fed. It poured sluggishly into the great land-locked harbor of Rio. It supped at the meager morsels floating in the sea and flowed on toward the deserted city and the undead man who stood watching it. And as its last glistening pseudopod oozed through the man-made gates, a sigh went up from the people on the mountainsides. Slowly and ponderously the barrier gate slid shut behind it, sealing the harbor from the sea. Great pumps began to throb, and columns of clear green brine of a river's thickness foamed into the unfillable Atlantic.

The plane had landed on the beach and Svadin climbed in. Now it was aloft, circling over the city and the harbor. The Thing was wary. It had learned, as all preying things learn, that each tiny insect has its sting. It sensed a subtle difference in the tang of the brine in which it lay—felt a motion of the water as Svadin's colossal pumps sucked at the harbor—detected a tension in the air. Its eddying lust for flesh quieted. It gathered itself together—swirled uneasily in the confines of the walled harbor—lapped questioningly against the rampart that barred it from the Atlantic. Its glistening flanks heaved high out of the blue waters. It gathered itself into a great ball of cloudy jade that rose and fell in the surge of the quiet sea. It lay as a frightened beast lies—frozen—but without fear, biding its time.

Day after day after day. Day after day under the burning sun, while curious human mites dotted the Beira Mar, thronged on the white moon-rind beaches—while devout thousands crammed the Igreja de Penha, spared by Revolution, knelt on its winding stair, prayed and knelt in the many Houses of God of Rio of the South—while inch by inch and foot by foot the sparkling waters of Rio's mighty harbor sank and the gray-black ooze of the sea floor steamed and stank in the tropic sun, and the vast green Thing from the sea lay drugged amid the receding waters.

Atop hunched Corcovado the majestic Christ of Rio stared down on Mankind and the enemy of Mankind. Atop sky-stabbing Sugarloaf, poised between sea and land, Nicholas Svadin stood and stared, and with him Heinrich Sturm. Above the sinking waters of the bay, great ships of the air droned and circled, dropping the fine, insidious chemical rain that drugged the Thing with sleep. And in the jewel-city below, Ramon Gonzales, human link between the Latin blood of old Europe and new America, stood and stared with burning eyes. Leagues across the oily, sleeping sea three other men stood or sat staring, grim-eyed, into nothing. Moorehead the American. Nasuki the Asiatic. Blond Rasmussen of Anglo-Scandia.

Day after day after day, while the miasmic stench of Rio's draining harbor rose over the white avenues of Rio de Janeiro, while the darkening waters lapped lower and ever lower on the glistening jade-green mountains of jellied ooze that lay cooking in the sun. Day after day after day, while those who had crept back to the Beira Mar, to rock-rimmed Nictheroy,

returned to the green, cool hills to watch and wait. A handful of sullen men in the Queen City of the South. Another handful on the naked cap of Sugarloaf and at the feet of the mighty Christ of Corcovado, miraculously untouched by the ravening of the god of Gold. And above it all the whine and drone of the circling planes and the far, dull mutter of the giant pumps.

Living things acquire a tolerance of drugs, demand more and more and ever more to sate their appetite. Drugged meat had lulled the Thing, and the rain of drugs from circling planes had kept it torpid, soothed by the slow lap of brine against its gelid flanks dreaming of future feasts. Now as the waters sank and the sun beat down on its naked bulk, the vast Thing roused. Like a great green slug it crept over the white thread of the Beira Mar, into the city of jewels. Buildings crumpled under its weight, walls were burst by the pressure of its questing pseudopods. Into the pockets of the hills it crept, over the broken city, and behind it on the summit of Sugarloaf was frantic activity. Nicholas Svadin's puffed blue hand pointed, and where he gestured a ring of fire slashed across Rio's far-reaching avenues, barring the exit to the sea. Slowly the zone of flame crept inward, toward the empty harbor, and before its fierce heat the Sea-Thing retreated, grinding the city under its slimy mass. Little by little it roused—its ponderous motions became quicker, angrier. Little by little fear woke in it, where fear had never been—fear of the little gabbling human things that stung it with their puny weapons. It lay like a glassy blanket over the ruined streets of Rio—a knot of twisting serpent-forms craving the cool wet blackness of the deep sea. Before its awakened fury the wall across Rio's harbor would be like a twig across the path of an avalanche. Its fringe of lolloping tentacles dabbled in the salt-encrusted pool that was all the pumps had left of the Bay of Rio, and in minutes the rippling mirror was gone, sucked into the Sea-Thing's avid mass.

And then Svadin struck.

I STOOD with my camera beneath the Christ of Corcovado. The sun was setting, and as the shadow of the western summits crept over the gutted Rio the Sea-Thing gathered itself for the assault that would carry it over Sugarloaf, over the wall that men had made, into the welcoming Atlantic. Then in the north, where the sun yet shone, came a flicker of metal gnats against the cloudless sky, the burr of their roaring engines speeding them through the advancing twilight. From Sugarloaf a single rocket rose and burst, a pale star over the sea, showering spangled flame, and the heavens were filled with the thunder of Man's aerial hosts—bombers, transports, planes of all sizes and all nations in a monster fleet whose shadow lay long on the curling sea like a streamer of darkness. Their first rank swung low over the hollow harbor and out of them rained a curtain of white missiles, minute against the immensity of Rio's circling hills. Like hail they fell, and after them a second shower, and a third as the fleet roared by above. And then the first bombs hit!

A ribbon of fire burst against the twilight. Fountains of golden flame vomited skyward, scores of feet over the naked surface of the Thing. Hundreds—thousands of bursting dots of fire, sweeping swaths of fiery rain, cascades of consuming flame—until the Sea-Thing blazed with one mighty skyward-reaching plume of golden glory that licked at the darkening heavens where the wings of Mankind's army of destruction still roared past, the rain of death still fell like a white curtain, painted by the leaping yellow flame of burning sodium.

I saw it then as old Heinrich Sturm had

seen it months and years before, as Nicholas Svadin had seen it when he began his colossal plan to bait the Thing into the land-locked bay of Rio de Janiero. Flame, killing and cleansing where no other weapon of Man would serve; green flame devouring the Earth-born god of Gold, corroding its crystal thews and consuming its golden brain; yellow flame feeding on the sea-green pulp of the sea-born Thing —changing the water that was its life into the caustic venom that slew it. As that colossal golden torch flared skyward over broken Rio I saw the mountainous bulk of the Sea-Thing shrivel and clot into a pulp of milky curds, crusted with burnt alkali. Water oozed from it like whey from pressed cheese, and tongues of the yellow flame licked along it, drinking it up. The black ooze of the harbor was drying and cracking under the fierce heat. Palms that still stood along the bare white beaches were curling, crisping, bursting into splinters of red flame, and even against the rising breeze the steaming stench of cooked flesh reeked in our nostrils.

The murmur of voices behind me stilled. I turned. The crowd had given way before the little knot of men who were coming toward me, driven from the crest of Sugarloaf by the fierce heat of the burning Thing. Flame-headed, red-nosed Donegan pushing a way for those who followed him. Gray-whiskered Heinrich Sturm pattering after him. Behind them, surrounded by men in braided uniforms, the fish-white, corpse-flesh shape of Nicholas Svadin.

I gave no ground to them. I stood at the Christ's feet and gave them stare for stare. I stared at Red Jim Donegan, at Zoölogist Heinrich Sturm, and I stared at the gross, misshapen thing that was master of the world.

I had not seen him since that night in Oaxaca, three years before. He had been hideous then, but now the scent and shape of Death were on him as they were on Lazarus when he arose blank-eyed from the grave. A gray cloak swirled from his shoulders and fell billowing over a body warped and bloated out of all human semblance. Rolls of polished flesh sagged from his face, his neck, his wrists. His fingers were yellow wads of sickening fat, stained with blue, and his feet were clumping pillars. Out of that pallid face his two bright eyes peered like raisins burnt glassy and stuck in sour dough. The reek of embalming fluids made the air nauseous within rods of where he stood. Nicholas Svadin! Living dead man—master of the world!

I knew Donegan from Oaxaca. He told me what I had guessed. Old Sturm's researches, made on bits of the jelly left by the Thing, on fragments hewed from it by volunteers, showed it to be built largely of linked molecules of colloidal water. Water-stuff of the sea—bound by the life-force into a semblance of protoplasm—into a carnate pulp that fed on the sea and took life from it even as it fed on living flesh for the needful elements that the waters could not give it. Living water—mountain-huge—destroyed by decomposing forces that no water could quench—by bombs of metallic sodium, tearing apart the complex colloidal structure of its aqueous flesh and riving it into flames of burning hydrogen and crusting, jelling alkali. Chemical fire, withering as it burnt.

I knew, too, Ramon Gonzales. I had seen him when he stood beside Svadin's bier in the sun of Budapest—when Svadin gave him the united Latin states of two continents to govern—when he stood ankle-deep in the green slime that the Sea-Thing had left coating the white walls of gutted Rio. I saw him now, his dark face ghastly in the yellow glare, screaming accusations at the immobile, pasty face of Nicholas Svadin. Those button eyes moved flickering to observe him; the shapeless bulk gathered its cloak closer about it and

swiveled to consider him. Higher and higher Gonzales' hysterical voice raged—cursing Svadin for the doom he had brought on Rio, cursing him for the thing he had been as a man and for the thing he was now. No sign of understanding showed on that bloated face—no sign of human feeling. I felt a tension in the air, knew it was about to break. My camera over Jim Donegan's shoulder saw Ramon Gonzales as his sword lashed out, cutting through Svadin's upflung arm, biting deep into his side, sinking hilt-deep in his flesh. I saw its point standing out a foot behind that shrouded back, and the flare of Jim Donegan's gun licked across my film as he shot Gonzales down. I saw, too, the thick, pale fluid dripping slowly from the stump of Svadin's severed arm, and the puffed, five-fingered thing that twitched and scrabbled on the gravel at his feet.

Above us, lit by the dying yellow flame, the Christ of Corcovado looked down on the man who had risen from the dead to rule the world.

* * * * *

Four men were the world when Svadin rose from the dead in Budapest. Nasuki, Rasmussen, Gonzales, Moorehead. Gonzales was dead.

Two men had stood at Svadin's side when he slew the Thing of the Earth and the gelid Thing of the Sea. Donegan, Heinrich Sturm. Sturm alone remained.

I SHOWED the pictures I had taken on Corcovado to drawn-faced Richard Moorehead in the White House at Washington. I showed them to Nasuki in Tokyo and to Nils Rasmussen in London. I told them other things that I had seen and heard, and gave them names of men who had talked and would talk again. I wore a small gold badge under my lapel—a badge in the shape of the *crux ansata,* the looped Egyptian cross of natural, holy Life.

I went to find Jim Donegan before it should be too late. It was too late. Since the morning of the day when Nicholas Svadin's silver plane slipped to the ground at the airport of Budapest, and Svadin's closed black limousine swallowed him and Donegan and Heinrich Sturm, the tall, red-haired American had not been seen. Sturm was there, close to Svadin, with him day and night, but no one could speak with him. And gradually he too was seen less and less as Svadin hid himself in curtained rooms and sent his servants from the palace, drew a wall of steel around him through which only Zoölogist Heinrich Sturm might pass.

Something was brewing behind that iron ring—something that had been boding since long before Svadin stood in Oaxaca and lured the god of Gold to its death—since long before he was first approached by the bearded, spectacled little German scientist who was now the only man who saw him or knew that he was alive. Yet Svadin's orders went out from the great, empty palace in Budapest, and the world grew sullen and afraid.

When he was newly risen from the bier, Nicholas Svadin had in him the understanding of a leader of Mankind and the genius of a god. Men took him for a god and were not betrayed. He thought with diamond clearness, saw diamond-keenly the needs and weaknesses of men and of men's world. He made of the world a place where men could live happily and securely, without want, without discomfort—and live as men.

As the months went by Svadin had changed. His genius grew keener, harder, his thinking clearer. Scientist—economist—dictator—he was all. The things he ordained, and which men throughout the world did at his command, were things dictated by reason for the good of the human race. But at the same time humanity had gone out of him.

Never, since that day when the heaped

callas fell from his stiffly rising frame in the sun of Budapest, had he spoken his own name. He was Svadin, but Svadin was not the same. He was no longer a man. He was a machine.

Conceivably, a machine might weigh and balance all the facts governing the progress and condition of one man or of all humanity, and judge with absolute, mathematical fairness what course each should take in order that the welfare of all should be preserved. If it meant death or torment for one, was that the concern of the many? If a city or a nation must be crushed, as Rio had been crushed, to wipe out a monstrous Thing that was preying on Mankind, should not Rio rejoice at its chance to be the benefactor of the race? No man would say so. But Svadin was not a man. What he was—what he had become—it was the purpose of the League of the Golden Cross to discover.

No movement is greater than its leaders. Those who wore the looped cross of Life were led by the three men to whom the world looked, next to Svadin, for justice—to whom they looked, in spite of Svadin, for human justice. Before he rose from his bier, they had ruled the world. It was their intention to rule it again.

No lesser men could have planned as they planned, without Svadin's knowledge, each last step of what must happen. That things went otherwise was not their fault—it was the fault of the knowledge that they had, or their interpretation of that knowledge. I had not yet found Jim Donegan. I had not seen Heinrich Sturm.

Through all the world the seeds of revolt were spreading, deeper and farther than they had spread among the little brown-blooded men who were rallied by fear of the god of Gold. But throughout all the world those seeds fell on the fallow soil of fear—fear of a man who had risen from death—of a man who was himself a god, with a god's power and a god's unseeing eye, with a god's revenge. Men—little superstitious men in thousands and millions, feared Svadin more than they hated him. At his word they would slay brothers and cousins, fathers and lovers, friend and foe alike. Reason and justice meant nothing to them. There must be a greater fear to drive them—and it was my job to find that fear.

In every place where Svadin had his palaces, his steel-jacketed guards, I peered and pried, watching for the sight of a red head, an improbably distorted nose. And not for a long, long time did I find it.

Svadin's grim castle loomed among weedy gardens above Budapest. I found old men who had planted those gardens, others who had laid them out, who had built their drains and sunk the foundations of the palace in a day before Svadin was born. Where only rats had gone for a generation, I went. Where only rats' claws had scrabbled, my fingers tapped, pressed, dug in the fetid darkness. Ladders whose iron rungs had rusted to powder bore my weight on the crumbling stumps of those rungs. Leaves that had drifted for years over narrow gratings were cleared away from beneath, and light let in. The little Egyptian *ankh* became the symbol of a brotherhood of moles, delving under the foundations of Nicholas Svadin's mighty mausoleum. And one day my tapping fingers were answered!

Tap, tap, tap through the thick stone—listen and tap, tap and listen. More men than Donegan had disappeared, and they crouched in their lightless cells and listened to our questions, answered when they could, guided the slow gnawing of our drills and shovels through the rock under Budapest. Closer—closer—they had their ways of speaking without words, but no word came from the red-headed, big-nosed American of whom their tapping told. Something prevented — something they could not explain. And still we dug, and

tapped, and listened, following their meager clues.

There came a time when we lost touch with the world outside. Three of us, in a world of our own, forgot that there was an outside, that there was anything but the one great purpose that drove us on through the dark and the damp. We had no word of the world, nor the world of us.

Nasuki grew impatient, and the man who was in Gonzales' place. The work of the Golden Cross was progressing, its ring of rebellion strengthening. To Rasmussen, to Moorehead, they cried for action. The brooding stillness that lay over Svadin's palace, the brutal coldness of the orders that issued through Heinrich Sturm's lips, shaping the civilization of a world as a sculptor would chisel granite, drove them to the edge of madness. Revolution flamed again—and this time brother was pitted against brother all across the face of the planet—fear against fury—Svadin against the Four.

I HAVE seen pictures of the Svadin whom that flame of war drew to the balcony of his palace, to shout his thunderous command of death above the kneeling throng. The disease, if disease it was that changed him, was progressing swiftly. There was little resemblance to the man who lay dead a handful of years before, and on whom life fell out of an empty sky. He was huge, misshapen, monstrous, but so utter was their fear and awe that those groveling thousands questioned no word of his and cut down their kin as they would reap corn. The looped cross was an emblem of certain death. Men cast it from them, forswore its pledge, betrayed others who were faithful. At last one desperate, embattled horde stormed the grim castle above Budapest, while the sullen ring of the faithful closed in around them. Under their feet, ignorant of what was happening above us, we three dug and tapped, tapped and dug—*and found!*

I remember that moment when I knelt in the stuffy darkness of the tunnel, digging my fingers into the cracks on either side of that massive block. For hours, two sleeping while one worked, we had chiseled at it, widening the crevices, carving a grip, loosening it from the bed in which it had been set a lifetime before. My numbed fingers seemed to become part of the cold stone. Dunard was tugging at me, begging me to give him his chance. Then the great block shifted in its bed, tilted and slid crushingly against me. Barely in time I slipped out from under it; then I was leaning over its slimy mass, Smirnoff's torch in my hand, peering into the black cavern beyond. The round beam of the torch wavered across moldering straw—across dripping, fungus-feathered walls. It centered on a face, huge-nosed, topped with matted red hair.

It was Donegan!

We fed him while Dunard hacked at the gyves that held him spread-eagled against the wall. As he grew stronger he talked—answering my questions—telling of things that grew too horribly clear in the light of past happenings. At last we parted, Dunard and Smirnoff to carry word to the Brotherhood of the Cross—Donegan and I into the dark dungeons of Nicholas Svadin!

The guard at the cell door died as other guards have died before; we had no choice. I remembered those voices which were only fingers tap-tap-tapping through stone. I knew what those buried men would do if only they could—and gave them their chance.

We were a little army in ourselves when we charged up the great central staircase of Svadin's castle against the grim line of faithful guards. At the landing they held us—and outside, rattling in the gardens beyond the great doors, we could hear the

gunfire of that last stand of our Brotherhood against ignorance and fear. We thought then that Dunard and Smirnoff had won through, had given their message to those who could light the flame of revolt. We did not know that they were cut down before they could reach our forces. But armed with what we could find or wrest from the men who opposed us, we charged up that broad staircase into the face of their fire, burst over them and beat them down as a peasant flails wheat, turned their machine-gun on their fleeing backs and mowed them down in a long, heaped windrow strewn down the length of the corridor to Svadin's door.

We stood there at the head of the stairs, behind the gun, staring at that door—half naked, filthy, caked with blood. There was a great, breathless silence broken only by the patter of gunfire in the courtyard outside, muffled by the walls. Then Donegan picked up the gun and stepped over the crumpled body of a guard. His bare feet slapped on the cold stone of the hall and behind him our footsteps echoed, in perfect time, drumming the death-roll of Nicholas Svadin. We came to the door —and it opened!

Heinrich Sturm stood there. Sturm—grown bent and little. Sturm with horror in his eyes, with horror twisting his face and blood streaming down his chest from a ripped-out throat. Sturm—babbling blood-choked German words, tottering, crumpling at our feet, who stood staring over him into the great, dark room beyond, at Svadin, red-mouthed, standing beside the great canopied bed, at the ten foul things that stood behind him!

Donegan's machine-gun sprayed death over the bleeding body of Zoölogist Heinrich Wilhelm Sturm. Soft slugs plowed into the soft body of Nicholas Svadin, into the bodies of the ten things at his feet. He shook at their impact, and the pallid flesh ripped visibly where they hit, but he only stood and laughed—laughed as the god of Gold had laughed, in a voice that meant death and doom to the human race—laughed and came striding at us across the room with his hell-pack trotting at his heels.

There are fears that can surpass all courage. That fear drenched us then. We ran—Donegan with his gun like a child in his arms, I with old Heinrich Sturm dragging like a wet sack behind me, the others like ragged, screaming ghosts. We stumbled over the windrows of dead in the corridor, down those sweeping stairs into the lower hall, through the open doors into the courtyard. We stood, trapped between death and death.

A hundred men remained of the Brotherhood of the Cross. They were huddled in a knot in the center of the court, surrounded by the host who were faithful to fear, and to Svadin. As we burst through the great doors of the castle, led by the naked, haggard, flaming-haired figure of Jim Donegan, every eye turned to us—every hand fell momentarily from its work of killing. Then miraculously old Heinrich Sturm was struggling up in my arms, was shouting in German, in his bubbling, blood-choked voice, and in the throng other voices in other languages were taking up his cry, translating it—sending it winging on:

"He is no god! He is from Hell—a fiend from Hell! Vampire—eater of men! He—and his cursed spawn!"

They knew him, every one. They knew him for Svadin's intimate—the man who spoke with Svadin's voice and gave his orders to the world. They heard what he said—and in the doorway they saw Svadin himself.

He was naked, as he had stood when that door swung open and Sturm came stumbling through. He was corpse-white, blotched with the purple-yellow of decay, bloated with the gasses of death. Svadin—

undead—unhuman—and around his feet ten gibbering simulacra of himself—ten pulpy, fish-white monsters of his flesh.

He stood there, spread-legged, above the crowd. His glassy eyes stared down on the bloody, upturned faces, and the stump of his hacked arm pounded on his hairless breast where the line of bullet-marks showed like a purple ribbon. His vast voice thundered down at them, and it was like the bellowing of a lusty bull:

"I am Nicholas Svadin!"

And in hideous, mocking echo the ten dwarfed horrors piped after him:

"I am Nicholas Svadin!"

In my arms old Heinrich Sturm lay staring at the Thing whose slave he had been, and his old lips whispered five words before his head sagged down in death. Red Jim Donegan heard them and shouted them for the world to hear.

Svadin heard, and if that dead-man's face could show expression, fear sloughed over it, and his thick red lips parted in a grin of terror over yellow fangs.

"Burn him! Fire is clean!"

I CAUGHT up the body of Heinrich Sturm and ran with it, out of the path of the mob that surged up the castle steps, Jim Donegan at their head. Svadin's splayed feet pounded across the floor of the great hall, his hell-brood pattering after him.

Then the crowd caught them and I heard the spat of clubbed fists on soft flesh, and a great roaring scream of fury went up over the yammer of the mob.

They tore the little fiends to shreds and still they lived. They bound the Thing that had been Svadin and carried him, battered and twisting, into the courtyard. They built a pyre in the streets of Budapest, and when the flames licked high they cast him in, his hell-spawn with him, and watched with avid eyes as he writhed and crisped. The beast is in every man when hate and fear are roused. Far into the night, when Svadin and his brood were ashes underfoot, the mad crowd surged and fought through the streets, looting, burning, ravening.

When Svadin died, four men had ruled the world. Today four men rule a world that is better because Svadin rose from the dead that day in Budapest, that is free because of his unhuman tyranny. Moorehead, Nasuki, Rasmussen, Corregio. Red Jim Donegan is a hero, and I, and a hundred other living men, but none pays homage to dead old Heinrich Wilhelm Sturm. He was too long identified with Nicholas Svadin for men to love him now.

What we know of Svadin, and of other things, Sturm had learned, little by little, through the years. He told certain things to Donegan, before Svadin grew suspicious and ordered the American's death. It was Heinrich Sturm's mercy that won Donegan a cell instead of a bullet or the knife, or even worse. For somewhere during his association with the decadent dregs of Europe's royal courts the reborn Svadin had acquired, among other things, a taste for blood.

"All I know is what Sturm told me," Donegan says. "The old man was pretty shrewd, and what he didn't know he guessed—and I reckon he guessed close. It was curiosity made him stay on with Svadin—first off, anyway. Afterward he knew too much to get away.

"There must have been spores of life, so Sturm said. There was a Swede by the name of Arrhenius—back years ago—who thought that life might travel from planet to planet in spores so small that light could push them through space. He said that spore-dust from ferns and moss and fungus, and things like bacteria that were very small, could pass from world to world that way. And he figured there might be spores of pure life drifting around out

there in space between the stars, and that whenever they fell on a planet, life would start there.

"That's what happened to us, according to the old man. There were three spores that fell here, all within a short time of each other. One fell in the sea, and it brought the Sea-Thing to life, made mostly of complex molecules of colloidal water and salts out of the sea-ooze where the spore fell. It could grow by sucking up water, but it needed those salts from decomposed, organic things too. That's why it attacked cities, where there was plenty of food for it.

"The second spore fell on quartz—maybe in some kind of colloidal jelly such as they find sometimes in the hard stuff. There was gold there, and the Thing that came alive was what I saw, and what the Indians thought was one of their old gods come to life again—the god of gold and crystal. Svadin killed it with some radium compound that he invented.

"The third seed fell on Svadin and brought him to life. He wasn't a man, really, but he had all the semblance of a man. He had the same memories in his brain, and the same traits of character, until other things rooted them out. He came to life—but to stay alive he had to be different from other men. He had embalming-fluid instead of blood, and wax in his skin, and things like that, and he had to replace them the way we eat food to replace our tissues. When he changed, it was in ways a dead man would change, except that he used his brain better and more logically than any live man ever did. He had to learn how a man would act, and he had some willing enough teachers to show him the rotten along with the good.

"Those other things grew as they fed, and so did Svadin, but he was more complex than they were—more nearly like men. Where they grew, he reproduced, like the simplest kinds of living things, by budding off duplicates of himself, out of his own flesh. It was like a hydra—like a vegetable—like anything but a man. Maybe you noticed, too—a couple of those things, that grew after he lost his arm in Rio, had only one arm too. They *were* Svadin, in a way. They called his name when he did, there at the last. . . ."

The sweat is standing out on his weather-beaten forehead as he remembers it. I see the vision that he does—those ten miniature Svadins growing, budding in their turn, peopling the Earth anew with a race of horrors made in mockery of man. He reaches for the bottle at his elbow:

"We've seen Nature—the Universe—spawning," he says. "Maybe it's happened on Earth before; maybe it'll happen again. Probably we and all the other living things on Earth got started that way, millions of years ago. For a while, maybe, there were all kinds of abortive monsters roaming around the world, killing each other off the way Svadin killed the Sea-Thing and the god of Gold. They were new and simple—they reproduced by dividing, or budding, or crystallizing, and it was hard to kill them except with something like fire that would destroy the life-germs in them. After a while, when the seed of life in them would be pretty well diluted, it would be easier. Anyway, that's how I figure it.

"Svadin looked human, at first, but he wasn't—ever. What he was, no one knows, not even old Sturm. It's pretty hard to imagine what kind of thoughts and feelings a living dead man would have. He had some hang-over memories from the time he was really Svadin; so he started in to fix over the world. Maybe he thought men were his own kind, at first—at least, they looked like him. He fixed it, all right—only, after a while there wasn't anything human left in him, and he began to plan things the way a machine would, to fit him and the race he was

spawning. It's no more than we've done since Time began—killing animals and each other to get what we want, eating away the Earth to get at her metals, and oil, and so on. The god of Gold was kin to the Earth, in a way, and I guess he resented seeing her cut up by a lot of flesh-and-blood animals like us.

"I said he learned some of man's worst vices. Once someone had taught him a thing like that, and he liked it, it became part of the heritage that he passed down to future generations. Somehow he got the taste for flesh—raw flesh—and humans were just like any other animal to him. After Sturm stopped being useful to him, he attacked the old man too.

"You see, he had a human brain, and he could think like a man, and scheme and sense danger to his plans. Only—he didn't ever really understand human psychology. He was like an ameba, or a polyp, and I don't guess they have emotions. He didn't understand religion, and the feeling people had that he was a kind of god. He used it—but when awe turned into hate, and people thought of him as a devil instead of a god, they treated him like one. They burned him the way their ancestors burned witches!"

He tosses down a shot of rye and wipes his lips. "Next time it happens," he says, "I'm going to be drunk. And this time I'll stay drunk!"

Voice in a Veteran's Ear

By GANS T. FIELD

I am the man you killed. Had I been able,
I would have killed you first, that day we met
Between the shell-torn sty and ruined stable,
Rain in our eyes, shin-deep in mud and wet.
My broken trigger failed beneath my finger.
You smiled—and scowled, and raised your gun to me. . . .
Yet, after twenty years, I mow and linger
Where your hot eyes, and yours alone, may see.

Lo, here I crouch, here in this shadowed corner;
I creep before you on this moonless way;
I mutter in this bush; your breath is stilled.
You, from my murderer, have turned my mourner—
But, though you weep and name the saints and pray,
I shall remain. *I am the man you killed.*

"The dead man's slender fingers rested on the volume he had been perusing."

The Little Man

By CLIFFORD BALL

An odd and curious story about three strange murders, and a mild little man who was the author of them

1. The First Impression

"GOOD evening, officer," said the little man, touching the representative of the law timidly on his elbow to attract attention. "A pleasant evening, isn't it?"

Patrolman James O'Hara started. He had been intently interested in the lights of an apartment across the street. A blonde lived there and she apparently had never learned the use of a window shade. O'Hara had been delighted before the touch on his arm brought him so swiftly back to mundane soil. Once glance at the little man and his apprehensions vanished.

"Very, sir," he agreed.

He had in that brief look classified the man, deciding he was an example of the type who so often felt the vague thrill unimportant people experience conversing with a man in uniform. O'Hara rocked gently back and forth on the curb, his hands clasped behind him, as he appeared to be surveying the starlit heavens, but was actually cocking an eye for another intimate glimpse at the blonde.

Officer O'Hara waited for the next question, the inevitable inquiry, concealing his annoyance as best as he could manage. Now, he reasoned, the old fellow would ask: "Everything quiet tonight?" And he would reply that it was and consequently could be expected to be treated at length with theories about the habitual traits of criminals which his interviewer had gathered mentally during insomnia-ridden hours. But when the little man spoke he did not adhere to the routine patter Officer O'Hara had anticipated.

"I should hate to spoil your pleasant evening, Officer," he said, "but are you accustomed to the shock of discovering a corpse?"

"Ha!" retorted O'Hara, controlling his sense of humor. "Every hour or so!"

"I wouldn't have thought so after considering the type of residents in this section of the city," declared the little man without a smile. "But then I suppose these things happen in unexpected places. You wouldn't mind reporting the one upstairs? Someone else might discover it and be badly frightened, you know."

It was fully thirty seconds before the remark registered on O'Hara's mind, so deeply had he been immersed in anatomical studies.

"Look here!" he snapped, his eyes drawn back to the shabby little man. "You say a corpse? What corpse? Have you spotted a stiff around here?"

"I just left one," said the little man without emotion.

"Don't kid me!" threatened O'Hara. "A fellow discovering a dead one don't take it as easy as that! I ought to know—I pounded Tenth Avenue pavements once. Now what's the gag?"

"If my relaxation had not run to detective novels your language might be confusing," reprimanded the little man. "But I now have reason to be thankful for what I once considered a guilty pastime."

O'HARA sighed. This was evidently a psychopathic case for Bellevue. The man's clothing, although neatly pressed, was obviously too worn to belong to an aphasia-stricken millionaire even if the fellow was wandering in this section of the city. O'Hara decided to ignore the corpse entirely, extract what information he could, and call the station for transportation.

"What's your name, Mister?"

The little man sighed apologetically. "That will come later," he said. His voice remained mild, but the reply held a note of finality.

The unknown's threadbare topcoat had been turned up to cover his skinny throat over a neck not more than five feet above street level. The coat hung wide, exposing shiny serge and a thin string which once might have been a first-class necktie but now resembled a twisted rag. His feet were encased in a pair of scuffed tan shoes and his head bore a derby a size and a half too large. He kept his hands concealed in the side pockets of the shabby coat, and O'Hara, taking a second look at the mild features beneath the derby, decided the unseen fingers were not clutching a deadly weapon. Such a chap could hardly be dangerous. There was nothing extraordinary about his features. The little man's face was quite plain; the kind of a face that drifts by you unnoticed and slides from memory like the outlines of a passing stranger in a heavy fog. His profile was that of a thirty-a-week clerk who had been bending over pages of figures for some forty or fifty years; pale, colorless and undistinguished. The horn-rimmed glasses before his light blue eyes emphasized the meekness of his stooped carriage.

Officer O'Hara remembered the sincerity with which disarranged minds could conceive and describe lurid situations and he now definitely filed his estimate of the man in his mind. Smiling tolerantly, he surveyed the empty street. He was pleased that no pedestrians were within view, for sometimes these quiet fellows screamed their heads off when one requested their company in a firm manner.

"Don't drink, do you?" he inquired affably.

"Why—I like a little bock in the spring, Officer. Just a glass or two to remind me of my student days in Vienna. But if I may ask, just what has that to do with my corpse?"

O'Hara perceived suavity would not erase the memories of whatever hallucinations the man was afflicted with and accordingly grew terse.

"*Your* corpse, pop? So it's *yours* now!"

"I suppose you could call it that, Officer. But I really don't know just how to dispose of it, you see; so I'm calling your attention to it. You will find it on a bed in Apartment 3C of the Beekford Arms. Across the street; number 1215. The door is unlocked; you needn't break it down."

"Now look here!" Officer O'Hara could hardly be blamed because his voice rose above normal pitch. "You're donating me a corpse, huh? All laid out on a bed and—and everything! May I ask," he inquired sarcastically, attempting unsuccessfully to imitate the little man's voice, "if you shot, stabbed or simply poisoned this stiff you 'don't know just how to dispose of'?"

"I hate weapons of any kind," declared the shabby one. "Poison is particularly distasteful to me. When I decided to kill him I simply broke his neck with my hands."

"Let's walk down to the corner box," laughed O'Hara, relieved. He was unable to imagine his puny charge breaking even mere jackstraws with those frail hands. "On our way you show me those powerful hands, will you?"

THE little man thrust his wrists deeper into the sagging pockets of his worn coat and squinted up at O'Hara's bulk in a wistful fashion that reminded him of a

famous cartoonist's drawings depicting the Seven Dwarfs.

"You can hardly believe me, I suppose, Officer. Not that I hold your skepticism to fault—*he* was astonished, too, I think. And I admit I was quite amazed myself when I discovered the full possibilities of what yesterday was only a series of logical deductions. But I had to be right; it was——"

"All right, you were *right!* C'mon, pop."

"But, my dear sir, I can't accompany you. I've another appointment."

O'Hara was grinning, thinking of the story he could tell the boys at the station house. "Now you're not on your way to be breaking more necks, are you?"

"I haven't planned very far in advance—not yet. If I decide—no, don't attempt to manhandle me! Please, Officer, I'm sorry!"

The patrolman placed a weighty and commanding arm on the stooped shoulders. The little man twisted slightly, withdrew his hands from his pockets with their palms open and shoved at his opponent's herculean chest. Officer O'Hara's breath left his lungs with an unexpected wheeze as his full two hundred and twenty pounds rose into the air and fell back to the sidewalk five feet from their former position. He shook his head to clear away mingled shock and bewilderment, clawing for his gun, only to see a diminutive figure passing around a block corner before he could level the weapon.

Three minutes later a desk sergeant was announcing to his captain: "Sor, it's sorry I am to say it, but Jimmy O'Hara's as drunk as an owl! He's callin' from a box, and sez will ye send out a call for a little mutt with a darby and horn rims on his specs, weighin' about ninety or a hundred. The shrimp *threw* him—*him*, mind ye, the hunk of bones and beef he is!—up in the air and cracked his pate on the cobbles! And while ye're doin' this he suggests ye drap into the Beekford Arms and look about fer a corpse! 'Whose corpse?' I asks, and he sez 'Any corpse.' He don't know whose, sez he, but he's double-blasted sure there's wan there!"

The little man had made his first impression.

2. The Second Impression

IT WAS another twenty minutes before a ring of grim-faced policemen stood in Apartment 3C of the Beekford Arms and looked at the thing on the bed that had been Herman Wexel. The well-known, independently wealthy dean of Botham College had curiously died of a broken neck while reading in bed, the vertebræ of his neck had been snapped as the result of a terrific pressure applied at the nape; or so asserted the medical examiner, tracing with an indifferent forefinger the great livid welt that encircled the corpse's fleshy throat. A dim reading-lamp, suspended by a clamp to the head of the dean's bed, cast a sickly glow over the dead man's slender fingers where they rested on the scientific volume he had been perusing before he had acquired that horrified, empty stare with which he now contemplated infinity.

Standing well back in the shadows, silenced by the stern presence of his superiors, Officer O'Hara fumbled at the collar of his uniform and swallowed as he thought of bony fingers hidden in the pockets of a shabby topcoat.

Some time later, as the remains of Herman Wexel were departing the portals of the Beekford Arms in the customary wicker basket through air foggy with imprecations from the fingerprint staff because those diligent worthies had discovered a total absence of clues on doors and windows, another development occurred. A reporter sprinted into the foyer and frantically signaled to his "pic" man, who was engaged at the moment in recording for

posterity the gruesome parade within his unemotional lens. Immediately kindred hawks of the fourth estate swooped upon the scent of their fortunate brother.

"All right! All right!" surrendered the newspaperman. "Your desks will be calling you in a minute, anyway. Come on. . . . Hazlitt, the scion of the *Daily,* has been found dead just outside the door of his girl friend's apartment. You know Rosy Acre, the Girl Without a Fan! She found him. Says he was visiting her when some queer little duck rang her bell and asked to see the boy-friend. She left them talking in the hallway; later she hears a groan and a thump and goes to investigate. Hazlitt's there still, but the little guy's gone. And Hazlitt, who was once a champion wrestler, is flat with *a broken neck!* How d'ye like it?"

"Like the scent of my aunt's deceased cat!" swore Captain Travers. "Another!"

"Front page, if it's true," agreed another reporter without much faith.

THE late Harry Hershfield Hazlitt, born plain Louis Rodetsky, sprawled in the awkward posture commonly assumed in violent or sudden deaths beneath a bedsheet in a police-guarded hallway. The columnist's neck had been neatly snapped, leaving the pugilistic chin which had graced miles of his syndicated headlines sagging in a fashion that would have been totally unfamiliar to a host of avid readers. Hazlitt wore no coat, but neither shirtsleeves nor vest had been disarranged by violence, and the perfect folds of his necktie remained anchored behind the buttons of the vest as firmly as an undertaker's assistant could have placed them. From the bulge at the left armpit one of the examiners produced a form-fitting holster containing a fully loaded automatic. Either the victim had had no time to draw his weapon or he had not thought it necessary to resort to a lethal instrument for defense.

Inside the gaudy three-room apartment, Rosalie Acre, born Leah Rosenbloom, the "Girl of Ten Thousand Motions" and featured star at Rocci's Midnight Garden, sobbed hysterically.

"I wouldn't have known her," whispered one irrepressible scribbler, *sotto voce.* "I never guessed she actually wore clothes!"

"Shudup!" commanded a detective, shifting his gun.

"Of course I've told you everything," wept Miss Acre through a spasm of sobs. "I answered the door and the guy asked for Harry. 'Could I see Mr. Hazlitt?' he asked.

"I came back in and told Harry, and he said maybe it was something hot for the column because it would have to be to make anybody follow him here. He looked through the eyehole in the door before he went out, because there's crooks and other people, too, you know, who claim he has printed things about them he shouldn't."

"Not only crooks is right, baby," muttered one detective reminiscently.

"And he said," continued the dancer, 'Rosy, this guy's got a brand new joke for me, I betcha. The last one was such a hit I played it up for weeks from all angles and he got a little sore because he takes himself serious. But he's money in the ole pocket! The more I kid him the funnier he gets. He even makes me laugh; he's what you'd call a flooey case.' Those were Harry's exact words and I could tell them on the stand," declared Miss Acre hopefully.

"Then Mr. Hazlitt went outside?" prompted her questioner. "Did he shut the door behind him?"

"He closed it but left it ajar because of the spring lock. His—my keys were inside. I heard them talking very low before I turned on the radio; then I couldn't hear them at all except once when Harry laughed. Oh-h, he *laughed!*"

"And what did they say?" Her inquisitor patiently awaited the passing of the paroxysm. He was merely checking through a ritual which preceded the more lengthy questioning conducted at Headquarters, during which a confused witness frequently prevaricated replies.

"I—don't know. I heard Harry laugh and then there was something like a groan, and afterward a bump on the floor. I got curious and went to the door and—and I saw——"

"Yes, yes. Take it easy now. The little fellow wasn't there?"

"No! I was frightened—terribly! Harry was lying on the floor. I leaned over him and saw how pale his face was. I looked up and down the hall, but there was no one there. I believe I screamed, because the next thing I can remember is a crowd of people asking me what happened and why—of all the crazy things!—why *I'd* shot him!"

"Well, Miss Acre, you're not accused or even suspected of shooting him. And even if your—um—professional muscles are strong I'd not be in a hurry to report that you broke his neck. But if you will be so kind I'd like you to come down to the station and tell us a little more, because there may be something we've missed."

"There will be those awful photographers!" exclaimed Miss Acre, glowing with pleasure.

"Excuse me, Al," interrupted Captain Travers, "but I got here too late to hear the description. Just what did this caller look like?"

"Just a shrimp, she says. Skinny little fellow in cheap clothes and a derby hat, wearing cheaters. Acted bashful, like he wasn't used to talking with women. He must have used the stairs, I think, because the elevator operator can't remember bringing him up. Think you can place him?"

"No, but I'd like to, Al. Unless coincidence has gone entirely haywire tonight he's the same guy who murdered Herman Wexel only a half-hour or so ago!"

3. *The Third Impression*

THE abrupt demise of two such prominent characters as Wexel and Hazlitt, however widely separated they may have been in their individual pursuits of happiness, was nevertheless sufficient cause for disturbing the nocturnal slumbers of the City Commissioner. Incidentally the events closely preceded the eve of election, and on such dates headlines determine salaries. Murder! While newsboys screamed the titles that never fail to thrill the staid, home-loving citizen, the head of the city police force hastened toward a conference with his chiefs of staff, also routed from their respective beds. They converged in a private sanctuary even the most daring reporter hesitated to assault.

"Let us forget our natural curiosity, gentlemen, in penetrating the mysterious methods with which these twin murders were performed," requested the Commissioner of Police. "Obviously we must seek for a dual motive. It must be the easy way, or so I believe, in locating our little man; that is, if this man really exists."

"Two persons saw him," interjected the chief of detectives.

"Ah, yes! Two! But Miss Acre is in a semi-hysterical state, refuses even to look through the criminal photographs; and Officer—ah——"

"O'Hara, sir!" interposed Captain Travers, who was secretly delighted with the opportunity of mingling with the cream of officialdom and meant to make his presence realized by all.

"Thank you, Captain. Officer O'Hara tells a rather bewildering story about this unknown suspect hurling him into the air with the strength of—ah——"

"Tarzan," supplied Travers, innocently modernizing the Commissioner's metaphor

which had been meant to include Hercules. "But I know O'Hara as a sober, reliable man, sir—as are all the men of my precinct."

The Commissioner smiled. "You are to be congratulated, Captain. I respect the trustworthy members of your force, including yourself, but—ah—wouldn't you, now, in my place——"

"If Officer O'Hara says a pint-sized midget bounced him on the sidewalk, then it happened, sir!" The captain's face was white, but the thrust of his jaw was not weakened.

The Commissioner's face grew pink and his attendant staff shifted their weights uneasily. The muffled peal of a telephone intervened.

"Speaking," said the head of police. "Yes, that's all right. I left instructions that I should be called regarding any identification . . . what? . . . blue? . . . very well, Sergeant . . . yes, call me if there is any more."

He replaced the receiver and turned to the hushed circle. "The woman Rosalie Acre was evidently frightened into a pronounced mental state," he announced. "That was one of the men from her bedside in the hospital ward, saying she is talking wildly about the man who rang her doorbell and asked for Hazlitt having a blue face. Blue skin, she repeats. Probably a reflection of dim hall lights. Did O'Hara mention any discoloration, Captain?"

"Only that the man appeared to be very pale."

"Well then, to return to the motive. What could Herman Wexel, a college dean of undisputed refinement, have in common with such a filth-scavenger as Hazlitt to antagonize anybody? Perhaps the two murders were not related at all."

"I've been thinking, sir," announced a a detective unexpectedly.

"Why, thanks." The Commissioner's tones were humorous, sarcastic. "I was about to ask some of you to do so."

"I didn't want to say anything until I'd gotten it all together," said the perspiring officer, conscious of the eyes upon him. "It was the third man, you see. I couldn't think of his name, at first. He's—maybe—the next to go!"

"The next!"

Nerves were almost audibly strained throughout the narrow confines of the room.

"YES, sir. Two months ago this Professor Wexel loudly condemned the researches of another college, and you know how the Sunday sheets love to get hold of those scientific controversies when things are dull. I've been thinking, and I remember now how Hazlitt jumped into the argument and built up jokes about it in his column for a week or more before the subject naturally wore itself out. There might be some connection."

"Jokes!" exclaimed Captain Travers. "Rosy Acre said Hazlitt referred to a joke!"

"But it was nothing in my line," continued the man. "No threats or so forth. But I read in the *Daily* how this chap with the ideas got pretty sore at Wexel for lambasting his pet theories. Later he busted out at Hazlitt for ridiculing him, threatened to sue in fact; claimed the columnist had ruined his chances with the publishers. One publisher, Philip Amherst, refused to print a book written by this professor explaining the principles of the theory, on the grounds that something so freely given to the public and so easily ridiculed by the newspapers must not be worth the paper a printer would use to reproduce it. Amherst had considered printing it; it was at the last minute that he turned it down. So the professor blew up again."

"What was the name of this pseudo-scientist?"

"I forget, sir. You see the whole thing dried up and blew away weeks ago. I'd never even have read about it if my kids hadn't torn up the funnies one Sunday, and I wouldn't have remembered it again if these murders hadn't happened."

"Do you recall just what this scientist was attempting to explain or what unknown and fantastic solution he had arrived at?"

"No, sir, except it was something about concentrating power into molecules or compressing atoms. He claimed an ant should be able to place enough power into its jaws to crush an elephant if it could only open its mouth far enough. The Sunday supplements ran wild. Crackpots thrived on it. This guy claimed he could startle the world, and when Amherst declared he was not impressed the professor got indignant and swore he would impress him if it was the last thing he ever did."

"Give me the home address of Philip Amherst of Amherst and Dion, publishers!" the Commissioner was ordering Information. "Quickly!"

He held the receiver to his ear and nodded toward Captain Travers.

"Strange, isn't it?" he inquired, and the officer knew he was not expected to frame an answer. "Men lack faith in a thing simply because they are not able to understand it. Still you will swear an undersized man was able to beat up one of your largest members of the force on that member's word, although trained minds such as Wexel's disregarded the possibility—Hello! Hello! I wish to speak to Mr. Philip Amherst. Immediately. Police Commissioner calling . . . ah . . . speaking? Yes, Mr. Amherst. Sorry to disturb you at this unearthly hour."

THOSE close to the desk, holding even the sound of expelled breath, could hear the vibrations of the answer. Captain Travers leaned forward to eavesdrop.

"But what efficiency, my dear Commissioner!" grated the voice at the other end of the wire. "Here I am about to call for the aid of your superlative minions and out of nowhere comes to you the knowledge that I am in need of a uniformed protector! It's marvelous! Uncanny!"

"Mr. Amherst!" The Commissioner's tones reminded some of those present of orders given once upon a time when French soil ran red. "Do you—are you alone?"

"Not exactly. But practically. There is a little fellow who has just dropped in with the information that he is about to kill me. Hence I was just dialing the nearest station when you rang. Pray do not be alarmed. I am phoning from one side of my studio desk and he is seated on the other; between us I am holding a very reliable and fully loaded thirty-eight. Not that I really need it. I've seen his kind before and I always have been able to point out to them that I am not the man for cranks to arouse foolishly during such early hours to listen to brainless schemes, regardless of how clever these prodigies are in eluding the barriers of burglar alarms and servants I have installed. He apparently realizes it now, because he's sitting here with the most idiotic grin on his Puckish face. He seems to be enjoying my description of him!"

"Mr. Amherst! Who is the man on the other side of your desk?"

"You sound excited, Commissioner. I meant to ask why you called; hope I haven't been robbed or blackmailed through my family? This fellow? Oh, he's a harmless old professor of philosophy who used to be on the staff at Hartmoor College. Taught metaphysics, you see, and it went to his head. Expounding the science of the abstract, supernatural muscular expression, and so forth. It went to his head and he came out with a book so insane that the youngest proofreader of my staff would

have instantly rejected it. I read a little of it because I never liked that old fire-eater of a Wexel who was spilling condemnation over every little thing he didn't happen to agree with at the moment. I might even have published it, had the costs been taken care of, purely for the sake of arousing interest in my companies. Critics represent a lot of free advertising. But some columnist manufactured such a set of standard quips out of the theories and conclusions of the book that I dropped the idea entirely. So here he is threatening me with violent death and there's nary a weapon in his hands! Would you be kind enough to send a wagon for the gentleman? I'm so sleepy I'm beginning to see blue!"

"Blue? Where do you see blue?"

"What the devil—excuse me, Commissioner, but is the whole town wacky tonight? It's a silly question, but I actually do see blue. I guess it must be the light, or else those recently submitted illustrations I was studying before I went to bed. It's the professor's face that looks blue there beyond my desk-lamp; maybe he's anemic. He's a queer little chap and I'm still wondering how he got in. Hasn't said a word since he told me he killed Wexel tonight. It's certainly strange how illusion will make a perfect fool of a man, isn't——"

"Amherst!" shouted the Commissioner, shutting off the voluble outpour. "He did kill Wexel! *Now who is be?"*

There was a moment's pause before the eminent publisher spoke again in altered tones.

"I can't believe it! Wexel dead . . . this shrinking violet a murderer? No! Why, Professor Lucian Peters might get angry, but I'll bet you he would never intentionally harm even a butterfly. He's never harmed anybody. All his life, so he once told me, has been spent working on experiments to prove that the higher types of mentality are able to subordinate muscular reflexes; some anomalous theory about the ant and the elephant, the meek and the strong or the superiority of brains over brawn; some of that old rehash that manufactured fairy-tales a thousand years ago. And if you think little Lucian resembles a Greek wrestler, I'm sorry, Commissioner, because I'm positive he will never find a place on your monster criminal record . . . sorry for your ambitions, too, Lucian! But you'll never be more than a number in the asylum."

"Amherst!" roared the Commissioner into the mouthpiece. "Keep your gun on him! Keep the desk between the two of you until we get there!"

"Why, there's no danger . . . sit down, Professor! I said *sit down. You dratted fool, do I have to shoot you?"*

Three sharp punctuations echoed across the wires to the Commissioner's ears before he heard a muffled click. Somewhere at the other end of the connection a voice said "Ah-ah-h-h!" The policemen in the room stared at the dripping perspiration on their superior's forehead.

"Amherst! Mr. Amherst!"

"That was the last, sir," said a new, strangely serene voice in the other earpiece. "That will be all, thank you. Good-bye."

"Amherst!" the Commissioner screamed. With a wild light in his eyes he cried: "Peters! Are you there?"

At the other end of the line a hand silently replaced the receiver.

4. The Inevitable Last

DAWN flooded the city's turrets before the sleepy-eyed and baffled detectives had completed their useless search of the dwelling in which Philip Amherst lay dead with a broken neck and a twisted, horror-stricken face. The Commissioner's face might have been carven from marble. The murderer had not aroused any of the pub-

lisher's many servants, nor had he forced a single door or window to accomplish his sinister purpose, an interview with a widely known publisher which had terminated with the breaking of that publisher's neck.

"Find the home of Professor Lucian Peters and surround it," ordered the Commissioner. "But don't break in! If *he* should come out—if anyone should come out—follow, but do not attempt an arrest. Too many necks! . . ."

An amber sun rose in its glory above a half-awakened city as the Commissioner, with two accompanying cars and a bevy of motorcycles, sped over the macadam toward the two-story cottage which Information had told him was the residence of Professor Peters. The site of the dwelling was a full two miles outside of the city's limits.

"We've no authority here," protested Captain Travers, disregarding the set faces of his companions.

"My friend, we have authority to strive for human welfare—as far as mankind's authority extends!" announced the Commissioner.

The cottage of Profesor Peters was a ramshackle affair of plaster and shingles. Its windows were without shades and the condition of its entranceway emphasized either poverty or extreme neglect. Flanked by puzzled men who fingered automatics and machine-guns, the Commissioner's party ascended the broken steps of a dilapidated porch and entered a very bare and unkempt kitchen. Beyond it the living-room and bedroom were equally disordered, littered with ponderous volumes of scientific literature. The heavy books sprawled everywhere over tables, mantelpieces and underfoot. The fireplace was choked with innumerable crushed sheets on which hand-printed and unfinished algebraical equations were transcribed in a wavering hand. Obviously some scholar had spent considerable time there, ignoring such trifles as neatness and cleanliness, or even meals, for there were crunched biscuit fragments mingled with a saucer of muddy liquid which once might have been coffee.

Someone said: "Upstairs. To the Commissioner's credit, he preceded his men.

And there they discovered Professor Lucian Peters hanging from a fixture, very blue in the face and quite ignorant of their arrival.

"Could O'Hara be reached at this hour?" inquired the Commissioner. "I'd like positive identification. It's hardly possible to believe that this is the man responsible for this series of murders!"

"Amherst named him!" insisted Captain Travers. "And O'Hara's outside. You couldn't send that stubborn Irishman home today if you docked his pay!"

"Bring him in!"

HAD it been an inspection, Patrolman James O'Hara might have trembled in his socks, but at the moment he was not awed before the city's dignitaries. His eyes went straight to the dangling thing hanging from the ceiling's chandelier and his nostrils quivered similar to a hound's closing in on the last yards of the trail.

"So this is the end," he said as if speaking to himself alone. "Suicide. I wonder why he quit."

"O'Hara!" snapped the Commissioner. "Can you identify this—this man?"

"Why, it's *him*, of course. It's the little fellow who tossed me around like a feather last night."

There was a short silence in the room through which the rasping tones of the medical examiner broke like an unexpected tidal wave rushing over a calm lagoon.

"I insist, Commissioner," declared the world-weary follower of Hippocrates, "that this man Lucian Peters hung himself more than forty-eight hours ago!"

"Like Lucifer cast out of Heaven, I fall with unbelievable velocity."

Return From Death

By BRUCE BRYAN

An unusual story about a scientific experiment that failed—the terrific experiences of a man whose body lay in the doctor's ice-box

"CAN'T we get on with it, Doc?" The irritation in my voice was an unconscious screen to the stark fear that was welling up in my soul.

Bixby turned around slowly, grotesque with his high-domed forehead and watery eyes behind thick-lensed glasses. In his hand was a paper.

"I know how you feel, old man," he said quietly. "We'll get started right away. There are just a few necessary preliminaries. You've got the five thousand deposited to your credit, but I've got to protect myself. Here is a typewritten form that releases me from responsibility in the —ah—in the event that the experiment is not a success."

I grunted, rolling over on the white-enameled steel tray in which I was stretched at full length. The tray was mounted on rollers, and except that it was narrower, resembled an operating-table.

"In the event of my death is what you mean, isn't it, Doc?" I asked, grinning rather bleakly.

Bixby shrugged. His weak eyes regarded me almost disinterestedly through those heavy lenses.

"You realize as well as I do, Pierce, that there is always that chance. My experiments heretofore have never extended beyond the use of dogs or smaller animals. But you've seen it proved to your own satisfaction that, after freezing them to death, I have in every case been able to bring them back to life. Sign this, please."

Taking the paper from him, I waited while he hunted up a pen. My gaze traveled about the interior of the room. It was fitted up as a laboratory, and its completeness no doubt would have delighted the heart of any scientist alive. Bixby had money and to spare, and had surrounded himself with an experimental surgeon's paradise. But to me there was something cold and impersonal in those shelves of labeled bottles, those racks of gleaming metal instruments, and the complicated network of glass tubery that ran all over the place.

At one end of the laboratory was a large mechanical oven, flanked by standing cylinders of compressed gasses. Near the door at the opposite end squatted a huge electric refrigerating-plant. It stood about eight feet high, its flat-tiled top just brushing the ceiling, and was equipped with massive glass-paned doors that opened into vault-like compartments. Sliding roller trays, similar to the one on which I lay naked, fitted snugly into these apertures. As my eyes dwelt momentarily on this great ice box, reminiscent of an up-to-date morgue, an involuntary shudder ran through me.

And why not? Within the next few minutes I would be rolled into its cold embrace like a slab of beef in a butcher's shop.

Bixby shoved a pen toward me. With the jerky speed of nervous hysteria, I

scrawled my name at the bottom of the release. The doctor glanced at it perfunctorily, folded the paper and put it in his pocket.

"And now," he said, looking at his watch, "we may as well begin."

I TRIED to smile indifferently, but I know the gesture was a mockery. Bixby had assured me there would be no real pain—just the temporary discomfort many a man has suffered when caught in a sub-zero blizzard. The temperature in the ice box, he said, would drop gradually to thirty below, and I would slip easily into slumber. Eternal sleep, from which he promised to recall me.

Perhaps he could—and perhaps he couldn't. In any case, I reflected bitterly, what difference would it make? We'd gone all over this before. I was here of my own free will, a living human subject for Bixby's experiment—the last link in an uncompleted chain. The circumstances that led up to my presence in the doctor's laboratory are unimportant. Like many another poor mortal I had made a mess of my life, from an economic point of view, and things had been at low tide for so long that I held no hope of their ever becoming better.

Only a few nights before I had been contemplating suicide—contemplating it with the deadly seriousness of one to whom all that matters is the way and means. And even as I contrasted in my mind the comparative efficacy of the rope or gun, my eyes chanced to fall on that item in the daily paper in which those lethal articles had been wrapped. It related the astonishing work of Doctor Theophilus Bixby, the eminent scientist who had devoted a lifetime of research toward solving the black riddle of death.

Through the press an astounded world read of his revivification from actual death of guinea-pigs, and even dogs, frozen stiff for ten or twelve hours. On one hand the world of science was divided, some acclaiming, some doubting his results. Alined solidly against him on the other side were the church and the association for the prevention of cruelty to animals.

It appealed to me. Here was the ultimate gamble. And I was the one man on earth to offer up a life as the stake. I couldn't lose!

Fortunately, Bixby lived in the same city.

So I put away the gun and the rope, and walked through the snow of a late December afternoon to his address.

His secretary met me at the door of the big mansion in which he resided and maintained his laboratories. Taking in my seedy appearance, he told me coldly enough that the doctor was out. I said I'd wait. Attempts to dissuade me had no effect. Finally, Bixby himself came out.

"Now see here, my man," he began in a bluster, his weak eyes flashing annoyance through those ridiculous lenses.

I stood up, eye to eye with him.

"Doctor," I asked quietly, "do I look like a dog?"

A red flush mantled the scientist's pale cheeks.

"Do you—do you . . . see here," he stuttered angrily, "what do you want? Didn't my secretary tell you——"

"Forget that, Doc," I advised dryly. "I don't *want* anything. I'm not asking; I'm offering!"

That stopped him. For a moment he forgot his anger in his bewilderment.

"Offering? Offering what?"

I smiled, a little bitterly. Not much, perhaps. Only a human life. There was still time to back out. Then I cast the die.

"I'm offering myself, Doc—as your dog. And I don't think you'll have to buy a license tag for me, either."

Bixby wasn't dumb. Perhaps he had done most of his work with animals, but

he was no novice with human nature. His weak little eyes widened.

"Come into my office," he said abruptly, standing aside.

And so it was arranged. Bixby was no piker; there's nothing small about a man who probes the hidden laws of the cosmos. And he could well afford to pay as he went. For my part in the experiment, a part that was at once the easiest and the hardest, I was to receive five thousand dollars deposited to my account in any bank I chose. In case I didn't come back to claim it, the money would go to my only living relative—a sister back in Kansas whom I hadn't seen in years.

So there I was, supine on the enameled tray in Bixby's laboratory, waiting for him to start in. Already vague wisps of terror were coiling about my brain—strange in a man who had been on the point of taking his own life by a much more violent means.

THE doctor rolled a small table up close beside me. On its surface was a large amber-colored jar fitted with a double stopper from which sprouted a dialed gage and an intricate arrangement of thin glass tubes made flexible with rubber connections. Bixby tinkered with this for a moment, then approached me with an alcohol-soaked sponge in one hand and a scalpel in the other.

"First," he said, smiling with what in a physician might have been termed a suave bedside manner, "we must have a minor transfusion."

With expert fingers he sponged a small spot on my arm, made a deft incision with the knife, and unhurriedly inserted the nozzle of one of the tubes leading from the jar.

"A blood transfusion, Doc?" I queried nervously. "Am I anemic?"

"Quite the contrary," he assured me, his eyes on the dial. "Your blood is exceptionally healthy — and full-bodied. What we want to do is guard against possible clotting while—while you are in a state of suspended animation. To thin your blood out to the necessary constituency I am injecting a small amount of a compound derived from one of my own formulæ. Its chief elements are composed of a solution of ordinary sugar, glycerin and citric acid. And now, you will please remain as quiet as possible."

When the transfusion was complete and the wound on my arm taped, he drew out his watch. "It is now exactly nine-seventeen," he said, with no apparent relevancy. "Just one thing more, and we are ready."

Dipping a cotton swab into a small vial, he applied some sort of vaseline-like substance to each of my nostrils. Then he started to roll the tray on which I lay toward the huge refrigerator. One of its doors gaped open, waiting, like the brazen vent in a glowering idol of Moloch, to welcome a sacrificial victim to its fiery maw. Only here the flame was cold and slow with promise of a lingering death. . . .

"Wait, Doc!" I gasped shakily. "How —how about an anesthetic first?"

Bixby shook his head.

"Can't risk it," he explained. "Ether fumes imprisoned in the lungs and brain might serve to break down the blood corpuscles, defeating our purpose. I'm afraid you'll have to take it on the chin."

He hesitated, as if waiting to see whether I'd change my mind at the last moment.

For a minute I digested his words. I had read in the same newspaper account of his experiments on dogs some of the comments other scientists had made regarding his work. One of them, after examining a resurrected canine, pointed out that its mind was affected. The animal was able to walk about, to eat and sleep, but commands it had previously understood now seemed to fall on deaf ears. Yet the dog was not deaf. It had, the savant implied, become what in a human being

would be termed a half-wit—an imbecile. It apparently lived in a daze, failing to recognize its own master. Something was gone from its intelligence—*something* had not come back from death!

To this Bixby had only one answer: no one knew much about the canine brain. The animal in question had, necessarily, undergone a terrific shock. It was, he claimed, already beginning to recover from its experience. He even predicted that in a few weeks it would become entirely normal. Nevertheless, his colleagues shook their heads. Bixby had done a wonderful thing, was their verdict. It was an accomplishment unique in the annals of medicine. But he had neither conquered death nor solved any of its age-old secrets. Let him, therefore, be sure to confine his researches to animals.

Perhaps I sensed a quiet scorn in the doctor's unruffled patience. At any rate, something stiffened my wavering will. I had made a bargain, and I'd stick to it.

"If I can't go out unconscious, Doc," I argued, "how about a little drink before putting me on ice? Some artificial courage can't do any harm. Preserve my innards, if anything."

Bixby smiled. He poured me a generous shot of Scotch. I downed it with a feeling of *ave atque vale* and handed back the glass.

I took a long breath. "Okay, Doc," I whispered. "Let's go!"

Bixby said nothing. He wheeled me head-first up to the open door of the refrigerator, elevated the tray to the proper level and fitted the rollers into the groove of the coffin-like compartment. He bent over me, ghoulish behind those crazy glasses, and held out his hand.

"Good luck!" he said.

"Cheerio, Doc!" I grinned back at him.

The tray slid easily into the great icebox. There was a thud at my feet as the door was slammed shut, and through the thick pane I could see Bixby's hand shove down the lever that locked it from the outside. I exhaled slowly. There was no drawing back now; I was committed to man's last and greatest adventure.

FOR several minutes I must have lain rigid and still in the semi-gloom of that narrow compartment, like one who is listening for the footsteps of a ghost. What are the thoughts of a man about to die? I ought to know, but somehow I have no clear recollection of the vagaries of my mind after that heavy door shut me off from everything that lived. Somewhere I have read that when death is imminent a man's past unreels before his eyes like a high-speed cinema. If such was the case with me, I don't remember it. I simply lay there, flat on my back, and all sense of panic had vanished. Yet neither did I feel that hopeless longing for death that had brought me to this place.

For what seemed an eternity, I lay absolutely quiescent, waiting for the first chill of death's icy fingers. My belly was warm with the flush of raw liquor and I was, to be truthful, almost lethargic in physical comfort. Then I heard a muffled click, followed almost instantly by a steady vibrating hum. Bixby must have thrown the switch.

It won't be long now, I thought. Soon I'd begin to shiver. I'd turn numb and blue, my teeth would chatter, and after an agonizing interval I would be sucked into swift oblivion. But when? When? Suddenly I was shaken by an intense desire to live—to breathe warm air, to eat warm food, to wear warm clothes! The drone of electricity rose to a crescendo, throbbing through my head, torturing my pulse into a compelling rhythm. It sang a dirge of dissolution in my ears, forced a scream to my lips. I tried to sit up. My head banged against the low shelf above, and I sank down, half stunned.

The horrible droning seemed to lessen with my consciousness. I felt stifled. I strangled for breath. Of course, this place was air-tight! And then—*I shivered.* At last, insidious tentacles of cold were reaching out for me. My limbs stiffened; I shuddered like a person afflicted with tropical fever. This, I thought frantically, is the beginning of the end. This is the Gethsemane that will win undying fame for Bixby—and for me an obscure paragraph in some ponderous medical brochure.

I pounded on the walls, on the shelf above me, until my knuckles were bloody. I kicked at the heavy door until my toes felt as if they were broken. Gasping for breath, I fell back, my strength gone. A great wave of light, intolerable, blazing, flashed before my eyes. I closed them, blinded. Long streamers of white-hot lightning flickered through the lids, like the aurora borealis casting lambent flame athwart a polar sea. Swiftly I slipped into blackness, complete, engulfing.

A curious sensation of lightness came with returning consciousness. I felt like a wraith of smoke, bending before an unseen draft. Slowly, I opened my eyes, fearful of whatever sights the dead must look upon. Amazement drove every other emotion from my mind. I was staring at the huge refrigerator—not from the gloomy constriction of that narrow compartment, but from the floor of the laboratory outside. My eyes were riveted on the closed and bolted door behind which was the tray on which I had lain.

For a moment I stood there in a trance of unbelief. A feeling of overwhelming relief welled up in my soul. I was alive! The experiment had failed. But what was I doing standing here in front of the ice-box? How did I get here? And where was Bixby?

These questions, to which there seemed no answer, made me nervous. And as a man does, when he feels fidgety, I reached for a cigarette. I don't remember much about the absurdly inconsequential movements connected with getting the pack out of my pocket, abstracting a peg and lighting it. All I recall is the curious lack of effort and the seeming weightlessness of my hands. It was as if I had no sooner desired a smoke than I found myself puffing away.

A noise came from the other room, and I decided that Bixby must be in there. The door was closed, but it didn't occur to me to knock. Indeed, it seemed to me that one instant I heard that queer tinkering sound and the next instant I was there in the other room looking down at the doctor. He was crouching on the floor beside the generator that ran the refrigerator. There was a screw-driver in his hand and he was doing something to the brushes. Apparently he hadn't heard me come in, so I spoke to him.

Bixby didn't answer. He went right on working, as if he had not heard me. I spoke again, louder. Still he paid no attention. I began to get mad. The devil with him, I thought; I'll go back to the laboratory and pour myself another drink of that Scotch. And so suddenly it almost scared me, I found myself back in the laboratory with a glass of whisky in my hand.

As I tossed it off, that great ice-box caught my eye again. I stared at it with a sort of morbid fascination, waiting for the alcohol to send its permeating warmth through my veins. But strangely, there was no glow such as usually accompanied a stiff drink. An inexplicable sensation of uncertainty was coming over me. Either I had become subject to momentary fits of amnesia, or—something seemed decidedly wrong.

I found myself standing again in front of the ice-box, looking at the glass pane in that heavy door behind which Bixby had locked me. Something vague in the

shadow inside caught my eye and I bent over to peer closer. Then I got my first definite shock; then I began to realize how things really were. Because as I stood outside in the laboratory and gazed into the compartment through that glass window I saw — *myself lying inside, stretched out naked on the tray!*

THE cigarette in my hand dropped to the floor. Realization shook me from head to foot. Now I knew why I seemed so weightless, why doors seemed to mean nothing to me, why I moved about with such effortless ease and why distance was non-existent when I wanted to move from one place to another! I was dead! Dead! I could see my own body lying frozen inside that ice-box, and yet there I stood outside, fully clothed and shivering with a nameless dread.

Things began to whirl crazily before my eyes. The walls of the room leaned and tottered, converging into unimaginable angles, and I could look through them—through them and beyond into endless dimensions. I was dizzy, nauseated. My eyes were too heavy to keep open. I was caught up in a terrific maelstrom of forces, whirled to terrifying heights. With the breathless velocity of a comet I seemed to be hurled through empty space. Then gradually the vertiginous sensation abated. I forced my eyes open. Fiery, incandescent lights flashed past me, but aside from these I could see nothing that moved.

Still I seemed to be traveling with the speed of thought through a colorless immensity, traveling through space and through time, while the eons flitted past. I looked down from what felt an inconceivable height, and stared with uncomprehending awe at what might have been the earth itself, dropping out of sight like the rapidly diminishing tail-light of an express train at night.

Finally all sense of movement left me. I might have been standing on a platform in the intergalactic reaches, only there was nothing under my feet. There was no sensation of gravity or balance left to me. Only—thought. Unhampered, unconfined thought—and the knowledge that I was dead. No heaven and no hell, such as I had been taught in Sunday school. Only a vast solitude and an intelligence filled with untranslatable wonder.

How long this continued I do not know. Eons, perhaps, dedicated to the tempering of a newly released soul. I was a bodiless entity adrift in endless nothingness, surrounded by unseen universes of wheeling planets and writhing, gaseous nebulæ. But something was wrong—something was definitely out of tune with the cosmic laws in which I was as yet unabsorbed. I sensed that I was an alien mote here, because—because I wanted to live!

That was it! I was swept by an intense longing for the life I had voluntarily given up. I yearned for the impersonal coldness of that vault-like compartment in Bixby's ice-box. I craved the heartaches and disappointments, the physical discomforts of the drab existence I had renounced. There could be no peace even in death, in the face of such an unsatisfied craving.

Bixby and his experiment—how long ago that seemed! They were a shadowy tradition from a dim past. Vaguely I wondered about him. Was he carrying on his researches with other—subjects? For, of course, he had failed to recall me from death. I felt a sudden sensation of mirth. What an infinitesimal atom was Bixby, and what a mad dream he had cherished! Who and what was man, to think of solving the riddle of being? No doubt Bixby and all his generation had been in their graves a thousand years. Time was the merest flick of an eyelash here, where I sensed worlds being brought forth in fire and dying in frozen loneliness—all within the space of time it takes to utter these words.

Ages ago Bixby was forgotten, even to science — because his experiment had failed. I had gambled and lost. But what difference did it make? Even if I had lived out a full life, surrounded by all the luxuries of the rich — what difference would it make now?

But Bixby—had—failed! The thought droned in my mind. He could bring animals back to a semblance of life, but when he tried the same thing with a human being he was baiting God Himself!

I found myself wondering about my sister. Had she, in those ages long past, received the five thousand dollars I never returned to claim? And what had she done with it? What did she think of me, the wastrel brother who had bequeathed it to her? Even when I was alive it had been several years since I saw her. In a way it was a satisfaction to know that I had repaid her contempt and disdain with such a sum of money. It was a personal gratification, because my sister had always been small-natured and tight-fisted.

I could remember, as if it were only yesterday, when I came home from the war, broke and with no prospects.

"You can't hang around here for ever, Jim," she snapped at me on the second day. "You've got to get out and dig yourself up a job. Just because you're a war hero is no reason why you can loaf around my house."

Then it was I learned that the home I had lived in since boyhood had passed, with the death of my mother, to her—and her husband. Naturally, I got out. Got out and drifted, from one job to another. But now I wondered about my sister. I wondered what she had to say when she received the five thousand dollars. The wonder became an obsession. Her thin, sharp-featured face with its querulously suspicious expression rose before my eyes.

And even as I conjured up an image of her in my mind that feeling of vertigo assailed me again. Once more I was caught up like a bit of chaff in a whirling tempest of unknown forces. The bottom seemed to drop out of my heart. Like Lucifer cast out of heaven, I fell with unbelievable velocity. Far below, millions of light-years away, the green star of earth came into view. It waxed and swelled as I hurtled toward it with the speed of thought, drawn irresistibly back to that clay from which I had sprung.

FASTER and faster I fell. Billowing seas and tumbling mountains rushed toward me. I plunged into the atmospheric blanket that shrouds earth from the bitter cold of interstellar space, and air whistled past me like the keening of lost souls in Erebus. Consciousness was reft from me in great welters of spiraling light.

I was standing on the porch of my sister's house in Kansas. No sense of wonder was left in me; just a subservient acceptance. How I came there or why did not occur to me. I put my hand on the bell and pushed. But no one answered. I tried again, but I could hear no muffled ring from within and no approaching footsteps. Well, I decided, there's no reason why I shouldn't walk on in. And before the thought was completed in my mind, there I was inside, standing in the library. I faced a desk, behind which my sister was sitting.

She didn't look up. Her husband was beside her, and I saw that they were reading a letter.

"Hello, Sis," I said. "I guess you're surprised to see me."

But she paid no attention, went right on reading. There was an odd expression in her narrow eyes. Her husband was beaming with delight.

"Hey, Sis!" I began again, louder.

She ignored me utterly and looked up at her husband.

"It's unbelievable, Henry," she exclaimed. "Five thousand dollars! Where in the world could he ever have gotten so much money? I know he could never have saved it—he wasn't the saving kind. Do you suppose he—stole it?"

My brother-in-law cleared his throat.

"Now, my dear," he said unctuously, "we mustn't look a gift horse in the mouth, you know. Just think! Now we can get that new car, and you can have your fur coat. I shouldn't wonder but what we could have the house painted in the spring, too. Even after the funeral expenses are deducted we should have a tidy sum left."

My sister's brow wrinkled aggressively.

"Funeral expenses!" she repeated. "This letter doesn't say anything about the funeral expenses coming out of this money."

Henry shifted uncomfortably.

"Yes, I know, dear. But you, being his only living relative, you know. . . . Don't you think we ought to write and offer——"

My sister whirled on him angrily.

"Henry, are you a fool?" she cried. "We'll do nothing of the sort. Let the authorities bury him, if they haven't done it already."

Her husband shrugged nervously and drew back a step.

"But, my dear," he protested mildly. "You know that means potter's field. And after all, he's your brother."

My sister laughed coldly.

"You just keep your mouth shut, Henry. It won't matter to him—now."

A cold rage had been growing in me as I listened to this conversation. I was disgusted with my sister, aghast that I had actually willed five thousand dollars—the price of my life—to such a warped creature. Why—oh, God!—why did Bixby's experiment have to fail?

Thought of the doctor brought me upright, trembling. If my sister was still alive—then Bixby must be alive, too. I wanted to see him, to know what he was doing. What had he done with my body? Where was I buried? Surely, Bixby would not see me consigned to potter's field.

The desire to see him became an insatiable craving. He was half a continent away, and I began to think of how I should travel this distance. But no sooner was I considering ways and means than again I was seized in that vortex of cosmic forces, that whirlpool in which the senses reeled dizzily until blackness descended over everything. . . .

I WAS back in Bixby's laboratory, standing in front of that awful ice-box. The doctor was nowhere in sight, but from the other room came that subdued tinkering sound that I had heard—how many ages before! I began to shiver, overcome with a dreadful premonition. Bending over, I stared through the glass pane of the refrigerator compartment. Yes, by heaven! There was my body, still reclining naked on the enameled tray. It drew me like a magnet. An intolerable longing seized me. I wanted—I wanted to be with myself again. I wanted . . .

And even as I began to understand the longing, I felt myself being drawn forward like a moth to a flame. I felt myself going through that closed and bolted door, seeping into the air-tight vault through the invisible cracks as if I were no more solid than a tendril of gas. I was inside, hemmed in by narrow walls and the low shelf above. In the gloom I felt the coldness of my own body, looked into my own glazed, unseeing eyes. I threw my arms about the corpse. . . .

A great wave of light, intolerable, blazing, flashed before my eyes. I closed them, blinded. Long streamers of white-hot lightning flickered through the lids, like the aurora borealis casting lambent flame athwart a polar sea. Swiftly I slipped into blackness, complete, engulfing, with a roar

in my ears like angry surf thundering on a rocky coast.

Something choked me. I gagged, unable to catch my breath, conscious of a burning sensation in my throat. A cloying, powerful odor clung about my nostrils. I wanted to sleep, to rest, to lie still and forget everything in eternal slumber. But that pungent scent kept dragging at my senses. My eyes opened wide. Bixby was bending over me, peering through his heavy glasses with a queer mixture of anxiety and disgust. He was holding some sort of small vial to my nose—the source of that powerful aroma.

"Well, well!" he said jerkily. "How do you——"

I sat up suddenly, interrupting him with a wild shout.

"Doc!" I cried. "You did it! You did it!"

His small, watery eyes widened in surprise. He tried to push me back.

"Wait," he purred soothingly. "Wait a min——"

But I wouldn't be stopped.

"Bixby!" I grasped his arm, shook him. "The experiment was a success! You're the greatest man in the world! You've brought me back from the grave—oh, God! Back from death!"

I couldn't control my emotion. I broke down and wept, while Bixby stood off and regarded me with a perplexed frown. Finally he forced something on me. Scotch! I drained it, shaking in every nerve. The doctor waited. I steadied, grew quieter.

"Pierce!" Bixby placed his hand on my shoulder. "I've got something to tell you." He paused uncertainly.

I was scarcely listening to him, overcome with the wonder of my return from death. But his words bored insistently into my consciousness, compelling my attention.

". . . there's something mighty queer," he was saying in his dry little voice. "When I came in a few moments ago there was a cigarette butt on the floor in front of the refrigerator. And I thought I smelled smoke. I thought I smelled it in the other room, too. But I never smoke. And you —you were locked in that ice-box."

"Yes, Doc, yes!" I broke in. "That's what I want to tell you about. You'll never believe——"

"Wait, Pierce!" The doctor was imperative. "That can wait. You've got to calm down. As I was saying, after I locked you in the compartment in the refrigerator I went into the other room and threw the switch that stars the generator. It started up, all right, but in a moment it began to sputter. Finally it stopped completely. I thought perhaps the brushes might be dirty, so I got a screw-driver. It's only the work of a few minutes to clean them. But I couldn't get it going again; so I called the electric repair company just a moment ago. They say they are tied up with business—can't send a man out to fix it before tomorrow. So I'm afraid——"

I stared at him.

"Doc," I whispered. "You mean——"

Bixby nodded.

"We can't do anything more today. So I came right back in here and took you out. I thought at first you had fainted, and I was a little worried. I brought you to with whisky and ammonia. How do you feel now?"

My eyes continued to search his expressionless face.

"You mean—there was no experiment?" I stammered. "That I wasn't frozen to——"

Bixby laughed shortly.

"Of course not. The generator failed before there could have been any possible change in the temperature of that compartment." He drew out his watch. "Why, man, you haven't been in there fifteen minutes!"

Dazedly, I looked at the watch. It was exactly nine-thirty.

The Fisherman's Special

By H. L. THOMSON

An odd little tale about lycanthropy

"AND so," said my lean-jawed share-of-a-seat on the Fisherman's Special from New York to Montauk, "there's more—much more, to it than backwoods superstition. Man—" he leaned over and pounded my knee with his hard, brown fist. "I tell you, I know."

I laughed. I had to. This big, hulking chap, who had seated himself beside me when the Special pulled out of Pennsylvania Station, had me jittery with his talk about the supernatural powers of man. He'd been at it for over an hour. I shivered, Patchogue and the Hamptons were behind us and the wind blasting through the opened windows of the coach was cold. Besides, this talk of werewolves and other things which I had relegated to my adolescence caused goose-bumps to shoot along my spine.

"I'll tell you a queer story," commenced my seatmate. "Back in my country——"

I looked at him quickly. He didn't look like a foreigner to me.

He grinned. "I've been here a long time," he said.

"You certainly have no trace of an accent," I said. "English?"

"No. Swedish. A man who has to travel a lot—first in one country, then another—soon loses his accent."

"I suppose so," I told him.

"I come from a small town in the extreme northern part of Sweden," he said. "Many queer and unnatural things happen there. There are werewolves—men who, at will, turn themselves into wolf-men and roam the countryside, bringing death, misery, and stark, wild-eyed horror." He shuddered and continued. "It's nothing new. It's old—old. It's been going on since the beginning of time. It's written of in musty books and talked of furtively as darkness falls. Every year at the beginning of the Christmas season, that's when it happens. It's when the snow burns blue with the coming dark, and squeals beneath your boots. The conversion of men into beasts! It has always been so. They descend upon the helpless inhabitants of ancient villages and destroy them."

"A lot of good yarns have been spun around that sort of thing," I said. "Interesting reading. Good stuff!"

His steady eyes stared straight ahead and he didn't answer me for a minute or two. Then he jerked his head impatiently. "Up there—just before night—when the snow is so white it turns blue and squeals beneath your boots like a living thing——" His voice died away as if he were living a million miles away.

He continued in the same singsong voice, "There in the town where I grew up, lived two brothers. Both were tall, straight and strong. They loved the same girl, but she preferred the older brother. He was good and steady, and the young one"—his voice became harsh—"was a fool. Selma—that was her name. She married the older brother early one spring, and the three of them lived together in their old, whitewashed house near the end of the village. But, the happiness of his brother and Selma kept misery gnawing at

the innards of the younger brother. He grew morose and ugly. He spent his nights in the town tavern. He'd stay there until all the lights in the little house were out. Then he'd go in and throw himself into bed and fall into drunken slumber."

I commenced to fidget. I wished soundly that I was at Montauk or back in New York. This fellow got on my nerves, dreamily. I made up my mind to check him fast during the rush from the train. I must have missed part of the conversation. I caught myself up short when I hear him say "werewolves."

"What's that?" I asked.

"I said, that the stranger he met in the tavern one winter's night told him he could change himself into a wolf-man and join the other werewolves on the eve of Christmas."

I shoved my tongue in my cheek. "He told the younger brother that?"

He nodded. "Yes. He told him how it might be done."

"Did he do it?" I asked.

My somber friend nodded again.

"How?" I asked, smirking. "I might try it myself if the fish aren't biting out here."

He gripped my arm. "My friend, if you value your sanity, if you would not rove the world with the screams of the innocents in your ears, if you value your hope of immortality—never try it. The poor misguided younger brother was a victim of jealousy—fancied wrongs."

"We all have 'em," I said. "How's it done?"

"It is done," he said, glancing over his shoulder, quickly, "by muttering certain words——"

"What words?" I interrupted.

"Those I shall not tell you. By muttering certain words and drinking a cup of ale to a man-wolf. If he accepts, it renders the man-natural worthy of acceptance of the werewolf state."

"I'll have to remember that," I said. "I've had many a cup of ale with strangers. All of which reminds me—how about a drink?" I reached for my gunny sack.

"I never drink."

"Well, here's to you," I said, peeling off the top of my "jug." Whether the road bed was rougher than usual, or whether the train went around a curve, I don't know. But, suddenly, my friend fell, almost in my lap, and my bottle of rye went out of the window.

Old gloom-face smiled. "I'm sorry," he said. "Possibly, I can make it up to you by finishing my story.

I GRINNED with only one side of my mouth. "Forget it. Shoot. Did the younger brother turn himself into a werewolf?"

"He did. On the eve of Christmas, when they strung the tree with popcorn and red cranberries, his hatred and jealousy boiled over. He tore out of the house and went to the tavern. There he filled himself with spirits and brooded over his loss of Selma. After a time, he got to his feet and went into the forest. There, in his drunkenness, he pronounced the words and assumed the wolf form."

"What'd he do? Go back and gnaw up his brother?"

"He came back, but first he traveled to the spot which had been made known to him by the stranger in the tavern. It was many miles north, beneath the wall of a ruined castle of some feudal lord. There he joined hundreds of others, who, in natural form, were weak, frustrated men such as he.

"Then the pack set out *en masse*. Strong doors were paper before them, white, unprotected throats their aim. Shrill gurgling screams of their victims on the still, cold air whetted their appetites."

"What about the younger brother—our hero?" I asked.

"I haven't forgotten the younger brother. He ran with great, leaping bounds straight to his home. His red tongue lolled from his gaping mouth. His eyes were green—green in their madness."

I frowned. This fellow certainly threw himself into his story like a professional. He had goose-flesh on my neck.

"This werewolf—this beast—attacked his brother and the lovely Selma as they lay in their bed. He felt his own brother's hot blood in his dry throat. He shook him as a terrier does a rag.

"The lovely Selma screamed and tore at him with her little hands."

"And no one came to help them?" I asked.

"You forget. The town was in an uproar. The whole pack attacked."

"And—Selma?" I said.

"Yes—Selma. Selma grabbed the other brother's hunting-knife from his belt on the back of the chair and stabbed at the werewolf, screaming curses."

"My God, how ghastly! Did she kill him?"

He shook his head. "No, she didn't kill him—she only tore off his right ear with the sharp knife, and, in the manner of all things who attack in the night his own pain defeated him. He ran out of the house and from the village. He disappeared into the dark forest. His red blood stained the white snow for miles."

"They could have trailed him that way."

He shook his head. "No. He assumed the human form once he was in the forest and staunched the flow of blood."

"But the wound," I protested. "How could he explain that to the townspeople —to Selma?"

"He never went back. He ran away. The people of the town must have thought he too was a victim of the werewolves that bloody, gory night."

THE conductor pulled the door of the coach open. "Montauk! Montauk!" he called.

All around us men started whooping and grabbing up their equipment. I sat quietly for a minute.

"What a story!" I finally managed to say. "What a story to tell a man when he's out at the end of nowhere! I've got the creeps."

He shrugged. "It was merely to pass the time. Any sort of conversation to pass the time. Good luck—good fishing." He got up to get his stuff.

"Same to you," I said, sticking out my hand.

As my eyes met his, I started, and my hand dropped nervelessly to my side.

He grinned crookedly, but that lopsided twitching of his face only accentuated the horror of the livid hole where his right ear should have been.

The House of the Three Corpses

By SEABURY QUINN

What weird statues stood guard over the grave of José Gutierrez and his wife?—a tale of poisonous centipedes, weird vengeance, and a brilliant exploit of Jules de Grandin

WE WERE walking home from Mrs. Douglas Lemworth's garden party.

Once a year the Old Dragon of Harrisonville Society holds a "fair" for blind and crippled children, and if you are engaged in the professions you attend, buy several wholly useless knickknacks at outrageous prices, drink a glass of punch or cup of tea and eat a cake or two, then leave as unobtrusively as possible. Even in most favorable conditions her parties are horrendous; tonight it had been a foretaste of Purgatory.

Though dark had long since fallen, the city sweltered in the mid-June heat. Sidewalks and roadways were hot to the touch; even the moon, just past the full and shaped like a bent pie-plate, seemed panting in a febrile sky. Absolutely stirless, the air seemed pressing down like a black blanket dipped in steaming water, and as Jules de Grandin simmered outwardly he boiled with fury within.

"*Grand Dieu des chats,*" he fumed, "what an abominable *soirée!* It was not bad enough that they should stifle us with vapid talk and senseless laughter, that they should force us to be polite when we wished to shed our coats and shoes and act the rowdy; *non, cordieu,* they must pile insult upon injury and give us *sacré* lemon punch to drink! I am outraged and affronted. I am maimed for life; never shall I get my face straight from that dreadful taste!"

Despite my own discomfort I could not forbear a grin. The look of wrathful incredulity upon his face when he discovered that the lemonade was only lemonade was funnier than anything I'd seen in months.

"Well, cheer up," I consoled as we turned from the side street into the avenue, "we'll be home soon and then we'll have a Tom Collins."

"Ah, lovely thought!" he breathed ecstatically. "To shed these so uncomfortable clothes, to feel the cool gin trickle down our throats—*morbleu,* my friend, is not that strange?"

"Eh?" I answered, startled by his sudden change of subject. "What?"

"Regard her, if you please. *La porte de la maison,* she is open."

Following the direction of his nod I saw the door of a big house across the street swing idly on its hinges, displaying a vista of dimly lighted hall.

In almost any other section of the city opened front doors on a night like this would have been natural as hatless men or girls without their stockings; but not in Tuscarora Avenue. That street is the last outpost of the pre-Depression era. Housegirls in black bombazine and stiff white lawn may still be seen at work with mop and pail upon its low white-marble stoops at daybreak, lace curtains hang in primly

white defiance of a changing world at its immaculately polished windows, housemen in uniform come silent-footed as trained cats to take the visitor's hat and gloves and walking-stick; no matter what the temperature may be, Tuscarora Avenue's street doors are never left open. "Perhaps"—I began; then—"good heavens!"

Sharp and poignant as an acid-burn, wordless, but hair-raising in intensity, the hail came to us from the open door.

"Allons!" de Grandin cried. *"Au secours!"*

We dashed across the street, but at the mansion's small square porch we paused involuntarily. The place seemed so substantially complacent, so smugly assured. . . . "We shall feel like two *poissons d'avril* if what we heard was someone crying out in a bad dream," he murmured as he tapped his stick on the sidewalk. "No matter, better to be laughed at for our pains than emulate the priests and Levites when someone stands in need of help."

He tiptoed up the steps and pushed the pearl button by the open door.

Somewhere inside the house a bell shrilled stridently, called again as he pressed on the button, and repeated its demand once more as he gave a last impatient jab. But no footsteps on the polished floor told us that our summons had been heard.

"Humph, looks as if we were mistaken, after all," I murmured. "Maybe the cry came from another house——"

"Sang du diable! Look well, my friend, and tell me if you see what I see!" Low and imperative, his whispered command came. Through the open door he pointed toward the end of the wide hall where an elaborately carved balustrade marked the ascent of a flight of winding stairs.

Just below the stair-bend stood a Florentine gilt chair and in it, hunched forward as though the victim of a sudden case of cramps, sat a man in house-servant's livery, green trousers and swallowtail coat corded with red braid, yellow-and-black waistcoat striped horizontally, and stiff-bosomed skirt.

I took the major details of the costume in subconsciously, for though his shirt-front was one of the least conspicuous items of his regalia, it seized and held my gaze. Across its left side, widening slowly to the waistcoat's V, was a dull reddish stain which profaned the linen's whiteness as a sudden shriek might violate a quiet night. And like a shriek the stain screamed out one single scarlet word—Murder!

DE GRANDIN let his breath out in a suppressed *"ha!"* as he stepped across the threshold and advanced upon the seated man.

"Is he—he's——" I began, knowing all the time the answer which his nod confirmed.

"Mais oui, like a herring," he replied as he felt the fellow's pulse a moment, then let the lifeless hand fall back. "Unless I err more greatly than I think, he died *comme ça"*—he snapped his fingers softly; then:

"Come, let us see what else there is to see, but have the caution, *mon vieux,* it may be we are not alone."

I reached the door which let off from the rear of the hall first and laid my hand upon the knob, but before I had a chance to turn it he had jerked me back. *"Mais non,"* he cautioned, "not that way, my friend; do this."

Touching the handle lightly he sprang the latch, then drew back his foot and drove a vicious kick against the polished panels, sending the door crashing back against the wall.

Poised on his toes he waited for an instant, then grasped the handle of his cane as if it were a sword-hilt and the lower part as though it were a scabbard and pressed soundlessly through the doorway.

"Bien," he whispered as he looked back with a nod, "the way seems clear." As I joined him at the threshold:

"Never open doors that way, my friend, when you are in a house whose shadows may conceal a murderer. Not long ago, to judge by the condition of that poor one yonder, someone did a bloody killing; for all we know he is still here and not at all averse to sending us to join his other victim. Had he lurked behind this door he could have shot you like a dog, or slit your gizzard with a knife as you came through, for you were coming from a lighted room into the dark, and would have made the perfect mark. *Hé,* but the naughty one who would assassinate de Grandin needs to rise before the sun. I am not to be caught napping. By no means. Had a wicked one been standing in concealment by that door, his head would surely have been soundly knocked against the wall when I kicked it, much of the fight would have been banged from him, and the advantage would be mine. You apprehend?"

I nodded appreciation of his wisdom as we stepped from the dim light of the hall into the faint gloom of the room beyond.

It was a dining-room, a long, high-ceilinged dining-room appointed with the equipment of gracious living. A long oval mahogany table of pure Sheraton design occupied the center of the floor, its polished surface giving back dim mirrorings of the pieces with which it had been set. In the center a silver girandole held a flat bouquet of early summer roses, a silver bowl of fruit—grapes, pomegranates and apricots—stood near the farther end, while a Sheffield coffee service graced the end near us. A demi-tasse of eggshell luster-ware stood near the table edge; another lay upon its side, its spilled contents disfiguring the polished wood. A pair of diminutive liqueur glasses, not entirely drained, stood near the coffee cups, their facets reflecting the flickering light of two tall candles burning in high silver standards at each end of the table. A chair had been pushed back as though its occupant had risen hastily; another lay upon its side on the floor. To me it seemed as if the well-bred silence of the room was holding its breath in shocked surprise at some scene of violence lately witnessed.

"Nobody's here," I whispered, unconsciously and instinctively lowering my voice as one does in church or at a funeral. "Maybe they ran out when——"

"You say so?" he broke in. *"Regardez, s'il vous plait."*

He had seized one of the candles from the table and lifted it above his head, driving the shadows farther back into the corners of the room. As the light strengthened he pointed toward a high three-paneled Japanese screen which marked the entrance to the service-pantry.

Something hot and hard seemed forming in my throat as my eyes came to rest at the point toward which his pointing stick was aimed. Protruding from behind the screen an inch or so into the beam of candlelight was something which picked up the rays and threw them back in dichromatic reflections, a woman's silver-kid evening sandal and the ox-blood lacquer of her carefully kept toenails.

He strode across the room and folded back the screen.

She lay upon her side, a rather small, plump woman with a mass of tawny hair. One delicately tinted cheek was cradled in the curve of her bent elbow, and her mane of bronze-brown hair was swirling unconfined about her face like a cascade of molten copper. Her white-crêpe evening gown, cut in the severe lines which proclaimed the art of a master dressmaker, displayed a rent where the high heel of her sandal had caught in its hem, her corded girdle had come unfastened and trailed beside her on the floor, and on the low-cut bodice

of her frock was a hand-wide soil of red—such a stain as marked the shirtfront of the dead servant in the hall.

One glance at her face, the startled, suffering expression, the half-closed eyes, the partly opened lips, told us it was needless to inquire further. She too was dead.

"*EH BIEN,*" de Grandin tweaked the needle-points of his mustache, "he was no retailer, this one. When he went in for murder he did it in the grand manner, *n'est-ce-pas?* Put the screen back, if you please, exactly as we found it. We must leave things intact for the police and the coroner."

He led the way into the wide, bay-windowed drawing-room at the front of the house, raised his candle a moment; then: "*Nom d'un nom d'un nom d'un nom,* another!" he exclaimed.

He had not exaggerated. Lying on the low ottoman beside the door communicating with the hall was a man in dinner clothes, dark-skinned, sleek, well groomed, hands folded peacefully upon his breast, silk-stockinged ankles crossed, and on the white surface of his dress shirt was the same ghastly stain which we had found upon the servant in the hall and the murdered woman in the dining-room.

De Grandin eyed the oddly composed corpse in baffled speculation, as if he added up a column of figures and was puzzled at the unexpected answer. "*Que extraordinaire!*" he murmured, then, amazingly, gave vent to a low chuckle. "*Comme le temps de la prohibition, n'est-ce-pas?*"

His Gallic humor failed to register with me. "I don't see anything so droll about it," I scowled, "and what had Prohibition to do with——"

"*Tenez,* ever literal as a sausage, are you not, my old one? Cannot you see the connection? Observe him closely, if you please. No one ever died like that, not even in his bed. No, certainly. He was carried here and arranged thus, much in the way the gangsters of the Prohibition era laid their victims out when they had placed them on the spot.

"But yes, this business is clear as water from a spring. It fairly leaps to meet the eye. This was no robbery, no casual crime. It was carefully premeditated, planned and executed in accordance with a previously-agreed-upon program, as pitilessly as the heartlessness of hell. The servant might have been, and doubtless was, killed to stop his mouth, the woman looks as if she might have died in flight, but this one? *Non.* He was killed, then dragged or carried here, then carefully arranged as if to fit into his casket."

Something evil and soft-footed seemed to stalk into that quiet room. There was no seeing it or hearing it, only the feeling, sudden and oppressive, as if the mid-June heat evaporated and in its place had come a leering, clammy coldness. Small red ants seemed crawling on my scalp; there was an oddly eery prickling in the hollows of my legs behind the knees. "Let's get out of here," I pleaded. "The police——"

He seemed to waken from a revery. "But yes, of course," he assented, "the police must be notified. Will not you call them, *mon vieux?* Ask for the good Costello; we need his wisdom and experience in such a case."

I scurried back into the entranceway, picked up the receiver, and dialed police headquarters. No buzzing answered as I spun the dial. The rubber instrument might have been a spool of wood for all the life it showed. Again and again I snapped the hook down, but without result.

"You have them—he is coming, the good sergeant?" de Grandin asked, emerging from the dining-room with the candle in one hand, his sword-stick in the other.

"No, I can't seem to get any response," I answered.

"U'm?" He pressed the instrument against his ear a moment. "One is not surprised. The wires have been cut."

He put the phone back on its tabouret and his small, keen face, flushed with heat and excitement, was more like that of an eager tom-cat than ever.

"My friend," he told me earnestly, "I damn think we have put our feet into a case which will bear scrutinizing."

"But I thought you'd given up criminal investigation——"

"En vérité, I have so; but this is something more. Tell me, what does ritualistic murder suggest to your mind?"

"One of two things, a malevolent secret society or a cult of some sort."

He nodded. "You have right, my friend. Murder as such is criminal, though sometimes I think it fully justified; but the killing of a man with ritual and deliberation is an affront not only to the law, but to the Lord. It is the devil's business, and as such it interests me. Come, let us go."

WE HURRIED to the cross street, walked a block down Myrtle Avenue and found an all-night pharmacy.

"Holà, mon vieux," I heard him call as his connection with headquarters was established, "I have a case for you. *Non,* great stupid one, not a case of beer, a case of murder. Three of them, *par la barbe d'un corbeau rouge!"*

Then he closed the phone booth door to shut the traffic noises out, and his animated conversation came to me only as an unintelligible hum.

"The sergeant tells me that the owners of the house have been living on the Riviera since last year," he told me as we started toward the murder mansion. "They rented it furnished to a family of Spaniards some eight months ago. That is all he knows at present, but he is having an investigation made. As soon as he has viewed the scene he'll take us to headquarters, where we may find——"

"Look out!" I warned, seizing his elbow and dragging him back to the curb as he stepped down into the street. A long, black, shiny, low-slung car had swung around the corner, driven at a furious pace and missing him by inches.

"Bête, miserable!" he glared at the retreating vehicle. "Must you rush him to his grave so quickly?"

I stared at him, astonished. "What——"

"It was a hearse," he explained. "One of those new vehicles designed to simulate a limousine. *Eh bien,* one wonders if it fools the dead man as he rides in it and makes him think he is alive and going for a pleasure trip?" He set a cigarette alight, then muttered angrily: "I saw his number. I shall report him to the good Costello."

The big police car, driven like the wind and turning out for no one, drew alongside the curb just as we reached the house, and Costello ran across the sidewalk to shake hands.

"There musta been some doin's here, from what you tell me, sor," he greeted.

"There were, indeed, my friend. Three of them there were, one in the entranceway, one in the dinging-room, one in the —*mon Dieu,* Friend Trowbridge, look!"

I glanced past him into the hall, steeling my nerves against the sight of the dead houseman keeping silent vigil over his dead employers, then gasped in sheer astonishment. Everything was as we'd left it; the hall lamp still glowed warmly in its shade of bronze fretwork, the big gilt chair still stood below the curve of the stairway, but —the murdered man had disappeared.

COSTELLO mopped his streaming forehead with a sopping handkerchief. "Where's this here now dead guy, sor?" he asked.

De Grandin muttered something unintelligible as he led us through the hall,

across the darkened dining-room, and pushed back the carved screen. Nothing but the smudge of shadow where our bodies blocked the candlelight was there.

"Parbleu!" de Grandin muttered, tugged the tip of his mustache, and turned upon his heel to lead us to the drawing-room. The low ottoman, upholstered in brocaded satin, stood in the same position against the damask-draped wall, but on it was no sign or trace of the dead man we'd seen ten minutes earlier.

Costello drew a stogie from his pocket and bit its end off carefully, blowing wisps of tobacco from his mouth as he struck a match against his trousers. "There doesn't seem to be much doin' in th' line o' murder here right now, sor," he announced, keeping eyes resolutely fixed upon the match-flame as he drew a few quick puffs on his cigar. "Ye're sure ye seen them dead folk here—in this house? These buildin's look enough alike to be all five o' th' Dionne quins. Besides, it's a hot night. We're apt to see things that ain't there. Maybe——"

" 'Maybe' be double-broiled upon the grates of blazing hell!" de Grandin almost shrieked. "Am I a fool, a simpleton, a zany? Have I been a physician for thirty years, yet not be able to know when I see a dead corpse? *Ah bah,* I tell you——"

Upstairs, apparently from the room immediately above us, there came a sudden wail, deep, long-drawn, rising with swift-tightening tension till it vanished in the thinness of an overstrained crescendo.

"Howly Mither!" cried Costello.

"Good heavens!" I ejaculated. "What the——"

"Avec moi, mes enfants!" de Grandin shouted. "Come with me. Corpses come and corpses go, but there is one who needs our help!"

With cat-like swiftness he rushed up the steps, paused a moment at the stair-head, then turned sharply to the left.

I was close behind him as he scuttled down the hall and kicked against the door that led into the chamber just above the drawing-room. Panting with the labor of the hurried climb, Costello stood at my elbow as the door flew back with a bang and we almost fell into the room.

Sitting in the middle of the floor, stockinged feet straight out before her, like a little girl at play, was a young woman—twenty-one or -two, I judged—dressed in a charming dinner frock of pastel blue georgette, a satin sandal in each hand. As we entered she shook back the strands of her almost iridescent black hair from before her face and beat against the floor with her slippers, like the trap-drummer of a band striking his instruments, then fell to laughing — a high-pitched, eery laugh; the laugh of utter, irresponsible idiocy.

"Si, si, si, si!" she cried, then fell into a sort of lilting, rhythmic song. *"Escolopendra! La escolopendra! La escolopendra muy inhumana;"* She drummed a sort of syncopated accompaniment to the words against the floor with her sandals, then raised the tempo of her blows until the spool-heels beat a sustained rat-tat on the boards as though she were attempting to crush some vile crawling thing that crept invisible around her on the floor.

"Escolopendra, escolopendra!" The words rose to a shriek that thinned out to a squeaking wail as she leaped unsteadily to her silk-cased feet and her wisp of frock swirled round her slender graceful legs when she bounded to the center of the bed and gathered her skirts round her, for all the world like a woman in deadly terror of a mouse.

"Esto que es?—what is this?" Costello asked as he stepped forward. "What talk is this of *una escolopendra*—a centipede—*chiquita?"*

"Ohé, caballero," the girl cried tremulously, "have pity on poor Constancia and

save her from the centipedes. They are all about, scores of them, hundreds, thousands! Help, oh, help me, I implore you!" She held her little hands beseechingly to him, and her voice rose to a thin and rasping scream as she repeated the dread word, *"escolopendra—escolopendra!"*

"Whist, mavourneen, if 'tis centipedes as scares ye, ye can set yerself aisy. Sure, it's Jerry Costello as won't let one of 'em come near ye."

Reaching up, he gathered her into his arms as if she were a child. "Come on, sors," he suggested, "let's git goin'. This pore gur-rl's real enough, 'spite of all th' gallopin' corpses that ye've seen around here."

De Grandin in the lead, we hastened down the hall, and were almost at the stairs when he halted us with upraised hand. *"A silence;"* he commanded, *"écoutez!"*

Very faintly it came to us, more a whimper than a moan; low, frightened, weak. *"Morbleu,"* de Grandin exclaimed as he turned the handle, kicked the door, and disappeared into the bedroom like a diving duck.

I followed, and Costello, with the girl still in his arms, came after me. In a wicker chair beside the chamber's window sat a young man, the mad girl's brother, judging by their strong resemblance to each other, gently rocking to and fro and moaning softly to himself. He was dressed in dinner clothes, but they were woefully disheveled.

His collar had been torn half from his shirt; his tie, unknotted, hung limply round his neck; the bosom of his shirt had been wrenched from its studs and bellied out from his chest like the sail of a full-rigged ship standing before the wind.

"Howly Moses!" Costello tilted his straw hat down on his nose, then pushed it back upon his head. "Another of 'em?"

"Gregorio, *hermano mio!*" the girl Costello carried cried. "Gregorio—*las escolopendras*——"

But the young man paid no heed. He bent forward in his chair, eyes riveted upon his shoe-tips, and hummed a sort of tuneless song to himself, pausing now and then to utter a low moan, then smile foolishly, like a man fuddled with liquor.

"Hey, Clancy," Costello hurried to the stairhead and called down, "come up here on th' run; we got a couple o' nuts!"

The burly uniformed patrolman came up the stairs three at a time, joined us in the bedroom and drew the drooling youth up from his chair. "Up ye come, young felly me lad," he ordered. "Come on out o' this, an' mind ye don't make anny fuss."

The boy was docile enough. Tottering and staggering as though three-quarters drunk, but otherwise quite tractable, he went with Clancy down the stairs and made no effort at resistance as they thrust him into the police car.

Costello placed the girl in the back seat beside her brother and turned uncertainly to de Grandin. "Well, sor, now we got 'em, what're we goin' to do wid 'em, I dunno?" he asked.

"Do with them?" the little Frenchman echoed acidly. "How should I know that? What does one usually do with lunatics? Take them riding in the park, take them to dinner and the theatre, buy them lollypops and ice cream—if all else fails, you might convey them to the City Hospital. Me, I go to research that never-quite-sufficiently-to-be-anathematized house. I tell you that I saw three corpses there, as dead as mutton and as real as taxes. I shall not rest till I have found them. Can they play hide-and-seek with me? Shall three cadavers make the monkey out of me? I tell you no!"

"O. K., sor, I'll go wid ye," agreed Costello, but to me he whispered, "Stay wid 'im, Doctor Trowbridge, sor. I'm

feared th' heat has touched 'im in th' head."

WITH the little Frenchman in the lead we marched into the hall again and, following the line of our first search, paused before the screen that masked the entrance to the service-pantry.

"See, look, observe," he ordered as he found the light switch and snapped the current on. "I tell you that a woman's body lay right here, and—*a-ah?*" He dropped upon his knees and pointed to a globular black button on the polished hardwood floor.

"U'm?" Costello grunted noncommittally, bending forward to inspect the globule. "What is it, sor, a bit o' jet?"

"Jet?" de Grandin echoed in disgust. "*Grand Dieu des porcs,* where are your eyes? Touch it!"

The sergeant put a tentative forefinger on the gleaming orb, then drew back suddenly, his heat-flushed face a thought paler. Where his finger had pressed it the button had gone flat, lost its rotundity and become a tiny pool of viscous liquid. What he had mistaken for a solid substance was a great drop of partly congealed blood.

"Bedad!" he wiped his finger on his trousers, then scrubbed it with his handkerchief. "What wuz it, sor? It looks like——"

"*Précisément.* It is," the Frenchman told him in a level, toneless voice. "That is exactly what it is, my friend. The heart's blood from the poor dead woman whom neither I nor good Friend Trowbridge saw here before we called you."

"Well, I'll be——" Costello began, and:

"One can almost find it in his heart to hope you will," cut in de Grandin. "You have made me the insult, you have intimated that I did not know a corpse when I beheld one, that I had hallucinations in the head—*ah bah,* at times you do annoy me past endurance!"

Grinning half maliciously, half derisively, he straightened from his knees and nodded toward the stairs.

"Let us go up and see what else it was Friend Trowbridge and I imagined when we first came to this house of the three corpses," he ordered.

We climbed the winding stairs, every sense alert for token of the unseen murderers or their victims, and walked down to the room where we had found the mad girl raving of the centipedes.

"Now," de Grandin cast a quick, stock-taking glance around the chamber, "one wonders why she babbled of *'las escolopendras.'* Even the insane do not harp upon one string without some provocation. It might have been that —stand back, my friends; beware!"

We stared at him in open-mouthed amazement, wondering if the room's influence had affected him, but he paid us no more heed than if we had been bits of lifeless furniture. Slowly, stepping softly on his toes, silent-footed as a cat that stalks a mouse, he was creeping toward the chintz-draped bedstead in the center of the room. And as he advanced noiselessly I heard a faint, queer, clattering sound, as though some mechanical toy, almost run down, were scratching on the bare, bright polished floor beyond the shadow of the bed.

Chin thrust forward, lips drawn back in a half snarl, mustache aquiver, the little Frenchman advanced some three feet or so, then quickly slipped the rapier blade from his sword-stick and stood poised, one foot forward, one drawn back, knees slightly bent, his bright blade slanting down in the beam of the electric light.

"*Sa-ha!*" He stabbed swiftly at the shadows and whipped his blade back. As he held the steel aloft for our inspection we saw a thing that writhed and twisted on its

point, an unclean thing six inches or so long; a many-jointed, horn-armored bit of obscenity which doubled convulsively into a sharp horseshoe-curve, then bent itself into a U, and waved a score or more of crooked, claw-armed legs in pain and fury as it writhed.

"Observe her very carefully," he ordered. "Medusa on a hundred legs, *'la escolopendra.'* I have seen her kind in Africa and Asia and South America, but never of this size. One does not wonder that the poor young *mademoiselle* was frightened into idiocy by the knowledge that this lurked among the shadows of the room. It is a lucky thing I heard her clawing on the floor a moment since and recognized her footsteps; had she gotten up a trouser-leg and sunk her venomed mandibles in one of us—*tiens,* that one would soon have found himself immersed in flowers, but unable to enjoy their scent. Yes, certainly."

"Ye said a mouthful there, sor," Costello agreed. "I've seen 'em in th' Fillypines—'twas there I learnt th' Spanish lingo so's I understood th' pore gur-rl's ravin's—an' no one needs to tell me about 'em. Shtep careful, sors; perhaps there's more of 'em about. They hate th' light like Satan hates th' Mass, an' our pants would make a fine place for their hidin'. It's glad I am ye seen th' poison little divil first, Doctor de Grandin, sor."

"CALLING all cars; attention all cars," a voice was droning through the police car's radio as we left the house. "Be on the lookout for a funeral car—a limousine hearse—license number F373-471. Reported stolen from in front of 723 Westmorland Street. License number F373-471. That is all."

"Ah-ha," de Grandin exclaimed. *"Ah-ha-ha!"*

"What is it, sor?" Costello asked.

"The joke has been on me, but now I

think that we shall turn the laugh on them. One sees it all. But of course!"

"What——" I began, but he motioned me to silence.

"The hearse which almost ran me down, whence did it come, Friend Trowbridge?"

"Down this street; it almost clipped you as we started to cross at——"

"Précisément, exactement; quite so. You have very right, my friend. And the address whence the stolen car was pilfered, where is it, *mon Sergent?"*

"Right round th' corner, sor. 'Bout halfway between this street an' Myrtle Avenoo——"

"Perfectly. It fits together like a picture-puzzle. Consider, if you please: Three bodies lie here, a hearse is stolen just around the corner; the bodies disappear, so does the hearse. Find one and you shall find the others, I damn think."

"THANK you kindly, gentlemen; all contributions to our stock of assorted nuts are gratefully received." Doctor Donovan, in charge of H-3, the psychopathic ward at City Hospital, grinned amiably at us. "You say you found 'em bab-

bling in a house in Tuscarora Avenue? Pair o' howlin' swells, eh? Well, we'll try to make 'em comfortable, though they can't have caviar for breakfast, and we're just fresh out o' pâté de foie gras. Still——"

"Doctor Donovan"—an interne pushed the superintendent's office door four inches open and nodded to our host.

"Yes, Ridgway?" asked Donovan.

"It's about the man and woman just brought in. It looks to me as if they had been drugged."

"Eh? The devil! What makes you think so?"

"Doctor Amlie took the girl and I examined the man. He seemed half drunk to me, and as I was preparing the test for alcoholism an urgent message came from Doctor Amlie.

"I left my patient with a male nurse and hurried over to the women's section. Amlie was all hot and bothered. 'What d'ye think o' this?' she asked me as she pointed to a spot of ecchymosis bigger than a silver dollar on her patient's arm. It was just above the common tendon of the triceps, and surrounded the pit of a big needle-wound. Looked to me as if she'd had a hypo awkwardly administered. She couldn't 'a' given it to herself.

"Amlie wanted to test for morphine or cocain, but I talked her out of it. Cocain's hardly ever injected except for surgery, and morphine makes 'em lethargic. This girl was almost hysterical, jabbering Spanish or Italian, I don't know which, and stopping every other moment to giggle. Then she'd seem about to fall asleep, and suddenly wake up and go through the whole turn again.

"I'd just finished reading Smith's *Forensic Medicine in the East,* and had a hunch."

"Uh-huh?" Donovan encouraged.

"Well, sir, I withdrew one-point-fifty-four cc's of blood from her arm, directly in the ecchymosed area, and gave it the Beam test, using ethyl chloride instead of alcoholic potash——"

"Talk English, son; I'm rusty on my toxicology," Donovan broke in. "What'd you find?"

"Galenical cannabis indica, sir."

"U'm? Any objective symptoms?"

"Yes, sir. Her reflexes were practically nil, the heart action was markedly accelerated and the pupils dilated. Just now she seems about to drop off to sleep, but there are periods of hysteria recurring at gradually increasing intervals."

"Uh-huh. How about your patient?"

"Doctor Amlie came over to the male section with me and we put my man through the same tests. Everything checked, but his symptoms are more marked. I'd say he had a heavier dose, but both of 'em have been doped with cannabis indica injected intravenously."

"How long d'ye think this condition'll last?"

"According to the text books not much longer than an ordinary drunk. They should sleep it off in eight to ten hours, at most."

"Pardon," de Grandin interrupted, "but is there not some way that we can hold these persons *incommunicado?* In France it would be easy, but here——"

"Sure, there is," Costello broke in. "You an' Doctor Trowbridge say you seen three corpses in that house, an' ye believe that they wuz murthered. These kids wuz found there, an' might know sumpin' 'bout it. We can hold 'em as material witnesses any reasonable time."

"Very good, take the necessary steps to keep them in restraint, and when they are recovered from their drugged sleep let me see them."

"SAY, Trowbridge," Doctor Donovan's voice came to me on the telephone next morning, "who wants to break in to see a nut?"

"Who wants to what?" I answered, mystified.

"You heard me right, feller. There was some monkey business down here last night, and one of those kids you and de Grandin and Costello brought here is mixed up in it. Can you and de Grandin come down here?"

Dawkins, the night chief orderly of the psychopathic ward, was waiting for us in the superintendent's office when we reached the City Hospital, and launched upon his story without preface.

"I was sittin' just inside the safety door —the grating, you know—and it was just ten minutes after one when the funny business started," he told us.

"How do you place the time with such exactitude?" de Grandin asked.

Dawkins grinned. "I went on duty at eleven, and wouldn't be relieved till seven in the morning. About one o'clock I began to get pretty sleepy, so I sent Hosmer to the kitchen for a pot o' coffee and some sandwiches. It seemed to me he took a little longer than he should, and I'd just looked up at the electric clock on the wall just opposite my chair when I heard a funny-sounding noise.

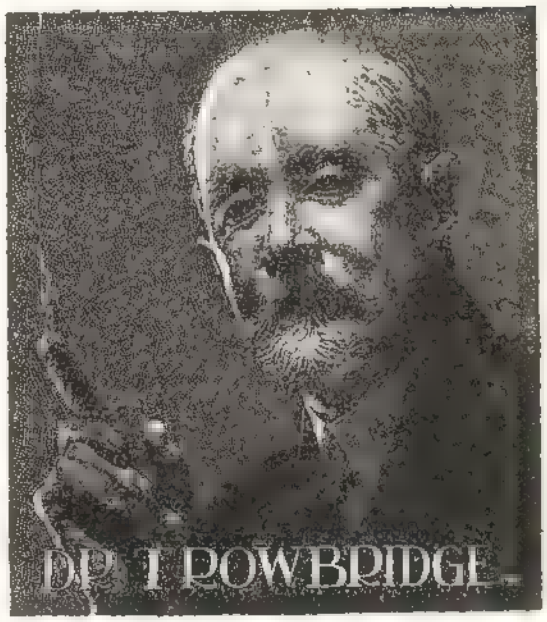
"It wasn't quite like anything I'd ever heard before, for while it was a sort of whistling, like a sudden wind, it was also something like the humming of a monster bee, perhaps an airplane."

De Grandin tweaked his mustache ends. "You say it combined a hum and whistle?"

"That's just about the way to describe it, sir."

"Very good, and then?"

"Then I saw the shadow, sir. You know, there's a ceiling light in the main corridor—the one connecting the ambulance entrance with the emergency ward—just around the corner from the hallway leading to H-3. Anybody standing around the corner of the junction of the two corridors, but between that light and the angle



made by our hallway branching off, casts a shadow down our hall. Many a time I've spotted nurses and orderlies standing to talk there when they should have been about their duties. Well, when I heard this funny noise I got up, and as I did I saw this shadow. It wasn't any of the hospital employees. It was someone with a derby hat on, and it looked to me as if he had a club or something in his hand. I didn't like his looks too much."

"You were suspicious? Why?"

"Well, we haven't had anything of the kind happen for some years, but in the old days when the gangs were running liquor, two-three times gunmen broke into the hospital and shot up fellers we had in here. Once they rubbed out an orderly because he tried to stop 'em.

"So I started down to the other end of the ward. Dennis was on duty there, and he's a pretty good one to have with you in a scrap. O' course, we aren't allowed to carry weapons—not even billies—in H-3. Too much chance of some lunatic's getting hold of 'em and going on a rampage. But I wanted Dennis to take a gander at this guy's shadow, and if he thought what

I did, we could call up the main office and have someone with a gun come round and grab him from behind while we went out to tackle him in front. So I started down to get Dennis."

"Yes, and then?"

"Well, sir, just as I got abreast of 34, the room they'd put Doctor Ridgway's patient in, I heard a sound that seemed to cut through the queer noise I've been telling you about, like someone filing a piece of metal.

"The patient was asleep and I thought he might be snoring—some of 'em make mighty funny noises—but when I looked through the peep-hole in the door I saw a feller on the outside, cutting through the window grating.

"You know how our windows are. There's a strong steel netting on the outside, then the glass, then another grating on the inside. This feller was working on the outside grating with a saw of some sort, and had already cut a hole two inches long.

"D'ye know what I think?"

"Nothing would delight us more than hearing it, my friend."

"Well, sir, I think that funny noise I heard was made to cover up the noise the saw made as it cut that grating."

"Your theory does great credit to your perspicacity. Did you see the one who sought to cut the grating?"

"Not very good, sir. He seen me about the same time that I spotted him, and ducked down out o' sight. Funny thing about him, though. I'd say he was a foreigner. Anyhow, he was mighty dark and had black hair and a large nose."

Donovan took up the story: "Dawkins turned in the alarm, and we rushed around to see about it. Of course, we found no one in the main corridor, but that's not strange. There's no guard at the ambulance entrance, and anyone can come or go that way at will. If we hadn't found the cut screen we'd have thought he dreamed it.

"Now, what I want to know is this: Who'd want to help those kids escape? As I understand it, they're being held as witnesses to a murder——"

"*Excusez-moi!*" de Grandin cut in; then, to Dawkins: "Will you take me to the window this one tried to cut through, if you please?"

They were back in less than three minutes, and a grim look set upon the little Frenchman's face as he opened his folded handkerchief and spread it out on Donovan's desk. "*Regardez!*" he directed.

Upon the linen lay some particles of glass, evidently portions of a smashed test-tube, and the crushed but clearly recognizable body of a four-inch centipede.

"THERE is a black dog running through my brain," he complained as we sat waiting in the study after dinner the next evening. "This case puzzles me. Why should it not be one thing or the other? Why should it be a hybrid? Somewhere" —he spread his hands as if to reach for something—"just beyond my fingertips the answer lies, but I cannot touch it."

"What puzzles you particularly?" I asked. "What they've done with the missing bodies?"

"*Ah, non.* That is comparatively simple. When the police find the stolen hearse, as they are sure to do in time, they will find the bodies in it. It is the half-caste nature of the case which causes me confusion. Consider him, if you please." He spread his fingers out fanwise and checked the items on them:

"We come on three dead corpses. There is nothing strange in death. It has been a scientific fact since Eve and Adam first sinned. All indications are that they were murdered. Murder, in and of itself, is no novelty. It has been going on since Cain slew Abel; but surrounding circumstances are unusual. Oh, yes, very. The servant

and the woman had been left as they had died, one in his chair, the other on the floor; but the man is carried to the drawing-room and laid out carefully. Is it that the killers first arranged him, and were about to do the same for their two other victims when we were attracted by the young girl's scream, and interrupted them? There is a thought there.

"Then about the young man and his sister. Both had been drugged with hashish and left in their respective rooms to be killed by poison centipedes. Why? one wonders. Why were they not killed out of hand, like the three others; why were they drugged instead of being bound and gagged when they were left as prey for the vile myriapods?

"And why should they be Spaniards, as they obviously are?"

Despite myself I grinned. "Why, for the same reason that you're French and I'm American," I answered. "There's nothing strange about a Spaniard being Spanish, is there?"

"In this case, yes," he countered. "If they had been Orientals I could understand some phases of the puzzle—the hashish and the so vile piping heard about the hospital when the attempt to drop the centipede into the young man's room was made. But their being Spanish upsets all my theories.

"Hashish is a drug peculiar to the East. They eat it, smoke it; sometimes, though not often, they inject it. *Alors,* we may assume that he who used it on these children was an Eastern, *n'est-ce-pas?*

"As for the so peculiar music — the 'funny sound'—which the good Dawkins heard, I know her. She is a very high, shrill sound produced by blowing on a specially prepared reed, and has a tendency to shock the sensory-motor nerves to a paralysis; something like the shrieking of the Chinese screaming boys, whose high, thin, piercing wail so disorganizes the hearer's nervous system that his marksmanship is impaired and often he is rendered all but helpless in a fight. Our agents in the Lebanon mountains report this music has been used by—*mon Dieu,* I am the monumental stupid-head! Why did I not consider it before?"

"What in the world——" I began, but before I had a chance to frame my question Nora McGinnis announced from the study entrance:

"Sergeant Costello an' a young lady an' man, sors, if yez plaze."

"GOOD evenin', gentlemen," the big detective greeted. "I brought 'em, as ye asked. These are Señorita and Señor Gutierrez y del Gado de Jerez."

Though the youngsters had been confined in the hospital it was evident that access to their wardrobe had not been denied them, and their appearance was far different from that of the babbling imbeciles we'd found in Tuscarora Avenue. The lad was positively seal-sleek; if anything, a thought too perfect in his grooming. He wore more jewelry than good taste required and smelled unnecessarily of lilac perfume.

As for Constancia, only the knowledge that she'd been in custody continuously, and so could not have sent a substitute, enabled me to recognize the wild-haired, panic-ridden girl of the previous night in the self-contained and assured young woman who occupied the chair opposite me. I'd forgotten how intensely black her hair was when we'd rescued her. Now it seemed even blacker. Drawn severely back in a French roll and parted low on the left side, it glinted like a grackle's throat in the lamplight. Dressed with pomade, two curls like inverted question marks were plastered close against her cheeks where a man's sideburns would be, and were rendered more noticeable by the long pendants of green jade that hung nearly to her creamy shoulders from her ear-lobes. Her

backless, strapless evening gown of shimmering black satin fitted almost as tightly as a stocking, covering to some extent but by no means concealing any of her narrow, lissome figure. Her ear-pendants and the emerald clasps of her stilt-heeled sandals were her only jewelry and the only spots of color in her costume. The vivid carmine of her painted lips glowed like a red rose fallen in the snow, for her face, throat, shoulders and tapering arms and hands were dead-white in their pallor as the petals of a gardenia. Despite her immaturity of figure and youthfulness of face —she seemed much younger than on the night we'd first seen her—there was a strange allure about her, and I caught myself comparing her to Carmen in a Paris frock or Francesca da Rimini with Rue de la Paix accessories.

Ankles crossed demurely, hands folded in her lap, she cast a glance from burnished-onyx eyes on Jules de Grandin. *"Señor,"* she murmured in a throaty rich contralto, very different from her reedy ravings of the other night, "they tell me that our parents are—have been killed. Is it truly so?" Her English was without accent, save for a shortening of the *i*'s and a slight rolling of the *r*'s.

"Alas, I fear that it is true, *señorita,"* de Grandin answered. "Can you tell me any reason anyone should wish them harm?"

Her sultry eyes came up to his beneath their curling fringe of long black lashes, and if it had been possible, I'd have said their darkness deepened. "I cannot tell you who wished evil to them," she replied, "but I know they lived in fear of someone or some thing. I am seventeen years old, and never in my life have I lived long enough in any place to know it well or call it home or make a lasting friendship. Always we have been upon the move, like gipsies or an army. London, Paris, the Riviera, Zurich, Rome, California, New York—we have flown from one to another like birds pursued by hawks that will not let them rest in any tree. Never have we owned a home—no, not so much as the beds we slept on. I grew up in villas rented ready furnished, in *pensions* and hotels. We were like the orchid that draws sustenance from the air and never sinks its roots into the soil beneath it. The nearest to a home I ever had was the three years that I was at convent school near Cologne. I think if they had let me stay there I should have found that I had the vocation, but"—her narrow naked shoulders came up in a shrug—"it was like the rest. No sooner had I learned to love it —found peace and contentment there—than they took me away."

"One sympathizes with you, *señorita.* You have no idea who or what it was your parents fled?"

"No, *caballero.* I only know they feared it greatly. We would come to rest in some new place, perhaps a little *pension* in Paris or Berlin, perhaps a furnished cottage in some English village, or a hotel in Switzerland, when one day *Mama* or the *Padre* would come in with fear upon his face, looking backward as he walked, as though an *asesino* dogged his steps, and, 'They are here,' or 'I have seen them,' one would tell the other. Then in hot haste we packed our clothing and effects—always we lived with porte-manteux in readiness—and off we rushed in secrecy, like criminals fleeing from the law.

"But I do not think the *Padre* ever was a criminal, for everywhere we went he was most friendly with the police. Always when we came to live in some new place the *cuartel general de policía*—the police headquarters—was one of the first places which he visited. Is that the way a fugitive from justice acts?"

"That's right, sor," Costello confirmed. "Colonel Gutierrez came to headquarters when he first moved here nine months ago, an' asked 'em to give orders to th' man on

his bate to give special attention to his house. Told 'em he'd been burglarized three times in his last residence, an' his wife wuz on th' verge of a breakdown."

DE GRANDIN nodded as he turned back to the girl. "The sergeant called your father Colonel Gutierrez, *señorita.* Do you know what army he served in?"

"No, *señor,* he had quit the military service before I was born. I never heard him mention it, nor did I ever see a picture of him in his uniform."

The Frenchman nodded understandingly. Apparently this conversation, so meaningless to me, confirmed some theory he had formed. "What of the night we found you?" he asked. "Precisely what occurred, *señorita?*"

Young Gutierrez leaped up and advanced a step toward Jules de Grandin. *"Señor,"* he exclaimed, as he clasped his slender, ring-laden hands in a perfect ecstasy of entreaty, "we—my sister and I—are in the dreadful trouble. These scoundrels have put the slight upon us. They have slain our parents. Blood calls for blood. It is the *rifa,* the *contienda*—the blood-feud—we have with them. We call on you to help us get revenge!"

"Gregorio! *Hermanito mio!"* the girl called softly as she rose and laid a hand upon her brother's arm. *"Silencio, corazonito pequeño!"* To us she added rapidly in English:

"Forgive him, *señores.* He lives in a small world of his own. He is, alas, *un necio dulce*—one of God's little ones."

There seemed magic in her touch, for the young man quieted immediately, and sat silently with her hand clasped in his as she responded to de Grandin's query.

"We had finished dinner, and Gregorio and I had been excused while *Mama* and the *Padre* had their coffee and liqueur. He—my brother—and I were going to the cinema and were changing from our dinner clothes when I heard a sudden cry downstairs. It was my mother's voice, pitched high and thin, as if she suffered or were very frightened."

"A-a-ah?" de Grandin cut in on a rising note. "And then, if you please?"

"I heard no more, but as I ran to see if I could be of help a hand was laid upon my doorknob and two men rushed into my room. One held a cane or stick of some sort in his hand and as I shrank back from him he thrust it at me. There must have been a pin or steel point on it, for it pierced my arm and hurt me dreadfully, but only for a moment."

"A moment, *señorita?* How do you mean?"

She looked at him and managed a wan smile. "There was the oddest feeling spreading through me — like a sudden deathly fatigue, or, perhaps, a sort of numbness. I still stood upon my feet, but I had no idea how I kept on them. I seemed to have grown to a giant's height, the floor seemed far away and unreal, as the earth does when you look at it from the top of a high tower; and I knew that in a moment I should fall upon my face, but even as I realized it I knew that I'd not feel it. I felt as if I never should feel anything again.

"Then I was on the floor, with the cool boards pressing on my cheek. I had fallen, I knew, but I had not felt the impact. One moment I was standing; the next I lay upon the floor, with no recollection how I got there.

"One of the men had a small cage of woven willow, something like the little straw cages that the Japanese keep crickets in, and suddenly he upset it and shook it. Something—several things—came tumbling, squirming, out of it, and I recognized them as great centipedes—the deadly poisonous *escolopendras* whose bite is terrible as that of a tarantula. Then they laughed at me and left.

"The centipedes were writhing toward the corners of the room as I tried to rise and run, but I could not. The numb, half-paralyzed sensation was gone, but in its stead I seemed to suffer from a sudden overpowering dizziness. And my eyes were playing tricks on me. The lamplight seemed to glow and glitter with prismatic colors, and the edges of the room began to curl in on me, like the petals of a folding flower. I was in deadly terror of the centipedes, but somehow it seemed I was too tired to move.

"Then one of them came running at me from the shadow of the bed. Its eyes looked bigger than the headlights of a motor car and seemed to glow with fire-red flashes. Somehow I managed to sit up and tear the sandals off my feet and beat the floor with them. I couldn't reach to strike the centipede, for if I leaned this way or that I knew that I would topple over, and then my face would be down on the floor where it was! But when I pounded on the floor with my shoes it seemed to be afraid and ran back to the shadows.

"I have no idea how long I sat there and drummed upon the floor, but presently I heard a woman scream and scream, as though she'd never stop. After a little while I realized it was I who screamed, but I was powerless to stop it. It might have been five minutes or an hour that I sat and screamed and drummed on the floor with my shoes; I could not say. But presently my door was opened and you gentlemen came in. To God and you I owe my life, *señores.*" The smile with which she swept us was positively ravishing.

"*Eh bien, señorita,* we are indebted to you for a very lucid exposition of that so trying night's occurrences," de Grandin said. "We need not trouble to interrogate your brother. From all that we have seen we may assume that his experiences were substantially the same as yours.

"You have heard about the attempt on his life at the hospital?"

"But yes," she answered tremulously. "Is there no safety for us anywhere? What have we done to anyone? Why should anybody wish to harm poor us?"

"Please understand me, *señorita,*" he returned. "It is for your own safety, not because we think of you as criminals, that we have arranged to lodge you in the city prison. Even in the hospital you are not safe, but in the prison with its fast-locked doors and many guards your safety is assured. As for who it was that orphaned you and then administered a drug and tried to kill you with the poison centipedes, I do not know, but I shall find out, never fear. I am Jules de Grandin, and Jules de Grandin is a very clever fellow."

"BE th' way, sor," Costello whispered as he prepared to escort the young people to the safety of the prison, "they've found th' missin' hearse. It wuz in th' bay, where it'd been run off Whitman's Dock. The plates wuz missin', but Joe Valenti, th' Eyetalian undertaker, identified it."

"Ah, that is good. The bodies were in it, of course?"

"No, sor, they weren't. Th' Harbor Squad's draggin' th' bay on th' off chance they mighta dropped out, but I don't think they'll find 'em. Th' hearse doors wuz all shut when it wuz fished up, an' hardly any water had seeped in. 'Tain't likely th' bodies fell out of it."

THE sergeant came to dinner three nights later, and did full justice to the *"ragout irlandais"* which Nora had prepared for his especial benefit. Not until the meal was over and we had adjourned to the study would de Grandin speak about the case; then, as he took his stance before the empty fireplace: "My friends," he announced as he drew a sheaf of papers

from his pocket, "I damn think I have the answer to our puzzle. You will remember Señorita Gutierrez knew her father had resigned his commission before her birth, and had never spoken of his military service in her hearing. Perhaps you wondered at it. We old soldiers are not wont to minimize the tales of our adventures. Yet there was good reason for his reticence.

"I have his record here. I have cabled to the *Sureté* and the *Ministère de la Guerre,* and they replied at length by air mail via South America.

"Constantino Cristóbal José Gutierrez y del Gado de Jerez was, we knew, a Spaniard; we did not know he quit his country in extraordinary haste with the *guardia civil* upon his heels. When the Barcelona riots broke out in 1909 he was a young subaltern fresh from military school at Toledo, where he had been educated in the traditions of Pizarro and Cortez. You recall what happened after that uprising? How Francisco Ferrer the great educator was tried by a court-martial? *Tiens,* when a military court tries a soldier it metes out substantial justice. When it tries a civilian one may wager safely that it was convoked to find him guilty of all charges.

"Our young *sous-lieutenant* was among the prosecution's witnesses and when the trial was completed the sentence sent the defendants to the firing-party.

"The whole world shuddered at the outrage, and the pressure of mankind's opinion was so great that three years later another military court revoked the first one's findings, and branded testimony given against Ferrer and his co-defendants as perjury.

"Gutierrez, now a captain, took offense at this supposed reflection on his veracity, challenged one of the court to a duel and killed him at the first pass. His opponent was a major, partly crippled by a wound he had received in Cuba, very wealthy and of an influential family. Captain Gutierrez killed his own career in the Spanish army when he killed his adversary, and had to flee in greatest haste to avoid arrest.

"*Eh bien,* he landed where so many disappointed soldiers land, in the Foreign Legion. He had the blood of the *Conquistadores* in him, that one. Embittered, bold and reckless, he was the *légionnaire par excellence.* By the end of the Great War he was a colonel.

"Then, as now and always, the Riffs and Druses were in revolt, actual or prospective, and Colonel Gutierrez when assigned to the Intelligence proved successful in obtaining military information from the captured rebels. The Spaniard has a flair for torture, my friends. Cruelty is as native to him as delicacy is to a Frenchman. Some few of Colonel Gutierrez' prisoners escaped, some he released when they had served their turn. All went back home crippled and deformed, and his popularity with the hillmen waned in inverse ratio to the number of their tribesmen he disfigured.

"*Tenez,* at length an elderly Druse gentleman named Abn-el-Kader fell into our brave colonel's none too gentle hands, and with him was captured his daughter Jahanara, called *lalla aziza,* the beautiful lady. She was indeed a lovely creature, just turned thirteen, which in the East meant budding into womanhood, with copper-red hair rolling low upon her snowy forehead and passionate, dreamy, wistful eyes into which a man looked once, then never cared to look away again.

"*Eh bien,* he was stubborn, that one. He was not at all talkative. Rather than disclose his tribesmen's plans he chose to die, which he did in circumstances of elaborate discomfort, and Jahanara was not only a prisoner, but an orphan as well.

"*Corbleu,* my friends, romance is much like history in that the more it changes the more it is the same wherever it is found. Race, religion and the custom of

blood-feud as old as the Lebanon Hills stood between them, but the captor had become the captive, and *Monsieur le Colonel* was eyebrow-deep in love with Lalla Aziza Johanara. One wonders if she loved or hated him the more when they first kissed, whether she would not rather have drunk his heart's blood than his eager, panting breath as he took her in his arms. *Tiens,* love conquers all, as Ovid says. In a little while she wed the man at whose command her father died in torment.

"But though the prince had wed his Cinderella it was not to be his lot to live in peaceful happiness with her. Oh, no! The Druses are a prideful, stiff-necked people. Their ancient tribal law forbids their women marrying outside their race. They have a proverb, 'No Druse girl mates with any but a Druse, and if she does, her father and her brothers track her down and slit her heart, though she be lying in the Sultan's arms.' The Druse maids understand this perfectly. Before they come of marriageable age they swear an oath to keep the ancient tribal law on pain of death—death by the knife of vengeance for themselves, and if they have borne hybrid children—'may they be the prey of centipedes.'

"You apprehend, my friends? Cannot you understand why Colonel Gutierrez quit the Legion and with his Druse bride, and later with his half-blood children, lived a hunted, fugitive existence, seeing a threat in each strange face, starting frightfully at every vagrant shadow, never feeling safe in any one place very long? Yes, certainly.

"Ordinarily only the unfaithful Druse woman and her children are the objects of the tribal Nemesis, but the hillmen had a long score to settle with the colonel. The memory of the missing hands and feet, the burnt-out eyes, the slit and speechless-babbling tongues of their blood brethren festered like a canker-sore in their minds. They owed him a long-standing debt of vengeance. *Tiens,* it seems they paid it."

"REGARD him, if you please," he ordered me at breakfast two days later, handing me a copy of the morning *Journal.*

"GUTIERREZ CHILDREN RETURN HOME"

the headline read, and under it a short item:

"Senorita Constancia Gutierrez and her brother Gregorio, who have been undergoing treatment at City Hospital for the past few days, are now fully recovered and have returned to their residence, 1502 Tuscarora Avenue, where they will hereafter be at home to their many friends."

"Is it not magnificent?" he asked.

"I don't see anything magnificent about it," I returned. "It doesn't even seem like good make-up to me. How did they ever come to stick an unimportant little item like that on the first page instead of burying it in the Society column? Who cares whether Constancia and Gregorio have gone home or not?"

"You and I do, by example," he answered with a grin. "The good Costello does, but, most important of us all, several gentlemen from the Djebel Druse are greatly interested in their movements. As long as they were lodged in City Prison they were safe. Now that they are home again——"

"Good heavens, d'ye mean that you're deliberately exposing them to——"

"*Mais oui,* my friend. We set the trap, we wait, we spring, *parbleu!* One might recast the old jingle to read:

"'Will you walk into my parlor?'
Said de Grandin to the Druses."

THE cry came quavering down the hall, shrill, sharp, fright-freighted.

For half an hour we had waited in the

darkened room adjoining that in which Constancia and her brother were, ears strained to catch the slightest sound which might betray arrival of the Druses. Downstairs, patrolmen waited in the drawing-room and kitchen, two others lurked in ambush in the back yard. Our baited trap seemed escape-proof, yet . . .

The scream came once again, then stopped abruptly, like a radio-transmission when the dial is curtly turned.

"*Morbleu,* they have won through!" de Grandin cried as he blew his police whistle and we tumbled through the door and dashed into Constancia's room.

From downstairs came the police guard, clattering and pounding on the steps. The bedroom fairly boiled with armed men, but nowhere was there any sign of the youngsters.

"No one came through th' front way," a policeman told Costello, and:

"Same wid th' kitchen," supplemented another. "A mouse couldn't 'a' got past us——"

"The screen is out," de Grandin interrupted, "and a drain pipe runs within a foot of the window. A moderately agile climber might have——"

"Hey, youse down there!" Costello bawled to the patrolmen in the back yard, "seen anybody?"

There was no answer. "*Ah bah,* we waste the time," de Grandin snapped. "It is probable they knifed the guards as they did the servant when they killed the colonel and his lady. After them!"

"They can't 'a' took 'em very far," Costello panted as we rushed downstairs. "Th' alley's too narrow for a car; they'll have to carry 'em."

The two patrolmen lay inert as corpses on the lawn, but a hurried glance assured us they were merely stunned, and we left them and rushed out into the alley.

Where the luminance of a street lamp gleamed dully from the alley-head at the cross street we saw a group of hurrying figures, and de Grandin raised his pistol. "*Canaille!*" he rasped, and fired. One of the fugitives fell staggering, but the others hurried on, and as they neared the light we saw they struggled with two shrouded figures.

They had perhaps two hundred feet start of us, and de Grandin did not dare to fire again for fear of injuring the captives. Though we raced at top speed they reached the cross street before we could close the gap sufficiently to fire with safety, and as we emerged from the alley we saw them scrambling into a car waiting at the curb with engine running. Next instant they roared past us and we caught a glimpse of Constancia's blanched face as she peered through the tonneau window.

Half a dozen blasts on Costello's whistle brought two squad cars rushing round the corner, and the chase was on.

Perhaps a quarter-mile away, but losing distance with each revolution of the wheels, our quarry sped. De Grandin hung upon our running-board, his pistol raised, waiting opportunity to send a telling shot into the fleeing car.

Eight, ten, a dozen blocks we raced at breakneck speed, our sirens cleaving through the sultry darkness like lightning-lances. We were less than half a block behind them when they swerved sharply to the right and darted down a cross street. When we reached the corner they had disappeared.

Like hounds at fault we looked about us. To the left a creek cut through the town, and most streets ended at it, only one in each five being bridged. The two cross streets to the right were torn up for repaving; they could not have fled that way, and no glimmering tail light showed in the street in which we stood.

Most of the houses in the block were deserted, and any of them might afford a refuge for the Druses and their prisoners,

but nowhere, look sharply as we would, could we espy a sign of their old motor. From house to darkened house we went, looking in the back yards for some trace of the car. At last:

"My friends, come quickly!" called de Grandin. He was standing at the creek bank, pointing to the shallow muddy water. Nose-foremost in the stream was a decrepit motor, its tail light still aglow. *"Tiens,* it seems to be a habit with them, throwing their equipage into the water," he remarked; then: *"En avant, mes enfants. A la maison!*

"No, be of the quietness," he warned as Costello put his shoulder to the door. "Let me do it." From his pocket he produced a thin strip of metal, worked at the lock for a moment; then, *"Entrez!"* he invited as the lock snapped back with a soft click.

Down the narrow, dust-strewn hall we crept, tried several doors without result, then began to mount the stairway, treading on the extreme outer edges of the boards to avoid betraying creaks.

An oblong of slate-gray against the darkness told us where a window opened from the upper hall, and toward it we stole silently, halting as de Grandin gave a low hiss. Thin as a honed razor-blade, but not to be mistaken in the gloom, a narrow line of faint light trickled from beneath a tight-closed door.

"You are ready, *mon Sergent?"*

"Aye, sor."

Like twin battering-rams they launched themselves against the door. Its flimsy panels splintered as if they were matchwood, and in the subdued light of a single electric bulb pendant from the ceiling we saw three men facing two figures lashed to chairs.

Constancia Gutierrez sat facing us, and beside her was her brother. Both were gagged with wide strips of adhesive tape across their lips; both had their shoes and stockings stripped away; more wide bands of adhesive tape bound their feet and ankles to the chair legs in such manner that they could not lift them from the floor.

One of the men was emptying a small cage of woven wickerwork as we crashed in, and as its little door flapped open we saw three writhing centipedes come tumbling out and strike the dusty floor beside the girl's bare feet.

A moan of terror — a scream of anguished horror muted by the gag across her lips—came from Constancia as the poisonous insects struck the floor; then her head fell forward as her senses failed.

At the crashing of the door the three men wheeled upon us, and there was something almost military in the singleness of their gesture as they reached beneath their unkempt jackets, ripped out eighteen-inch knives and rushed at us. *"Ya Rabaoiu!*— O foreigners!" one cried, but his words were drowned out by the thunderous roar of pistols.

De Grandin's little automatic seemed to blaze a single stream of fire, Costello's big revolver bellowed like a field gun. It was as if the three men walked into a wall. Like troops obeying a command they halted, wavered, stumbled. One hiccupped, gasped and slumped down slowly, bending at the knees. Another spun half around and fell full length upon his face. The third stood goggling at us, empty-eyed and open-mouthed, then stepped back shufflingly, seemed to trip on nothing and fell flat on his back.

"Excellent, superb, magnificent!" de Grandin commented. "We be marksmen, thou and I, *mon Sergent."* With a leap he cleared the foremost body, bounded up into the air and came down heavily, flat-footed. His small feet banged on the bare floor like the metaled shoes of a tap-dancer as he ground the centipedes to unclean pulp beneath his heels.

"HERE'S sumpin I can't figure, sor," admitted Costello as we proceeded with our search of the house.

A surprising miscellany had turned up in the half-hour we'd been working since we sent Constancia and Gregorio under escort to the hospital. In the room adjoining we had found the Druses' living-quarters, an evil-smelling, unkempt room with four bed-rolls, some cook-pots and valises filled with none too clean clothing. In the basement was a table like a carpenter's work bench, two pressure tanks, an airpump, several airbrushes of varying sizes, and, plugged into an electric outlet, a large fan. The table and the floor were mottled with dried spots of what looked like shellac, some white stuff resembling plaster of Paris, and here and there dull-glowing patches like metallic paint.

Now Costello handed us a filled-in printed form. It was a deed entitling José Gutierrez to full rights of burial in a six-grave plot in St. Rose's Cemetery—"Lot No. 3, Range 37, Section M."

"St. Rose's is a Cath'lic cemetery," Costello reminded us; "what th' divil were these haythens doin' wid a deed from it?"

De Grandin scarcely seemed to hear. His little eyes seemed all pupil, like those of a startled cat; his small blond mustache was fairly twitching with excitement. "The fan, the plaster, the blow-guns," he murmured. "One blows the paint and plaster with the airbrush, one dries it quickly with the fan, one then—*mais oui,* it is entirely possible. Come, my friends, let us hasten with all speed to the cemetery of the sainted Rose. I think our trail ends there!"

BY NO stretch of the imagination could the cemetery superintendent's greeting have been called cordial when, in response to Costello's thunderous banging on his door, he finally let us into his small, cluttered office.

"Sure, I sold a plot to Josie Gooteez," he admitted. "He an' his three brothers come to get it last Thursday. They wuz Mexicans or sumpin, I think. Anyhow, they didn't speak good English."

"And they made immediate interments?" asked de Grandin.

"Naw, they ain't buried nobody yet. But they stuck up a couple o' moniments. Damndest-lookin' things yuh ever seen, too. They come here yesterday wid two statoos in a truck, an' set 'em up theirselves—'fore th' cement bases wuz quite finished dryin'."

"Indeed? And of what were these so weird statues, if you please?"

"Huh, your guess is good as mine about that. They looked as if they had been meant to represent a man an' woman, but they ain't so hot. Seemed to me as if they'd molded 'em in cement, then painted 'em with bronze paint, like a radiator. We hadn't ought to let such things be put up here, but that plot's in th' cheapest section, an' almost anything goes there. That's where th' haythens and such-like bury."

THE superintendent's criticism of the effigies was entirely justified by all artistic canons. Standing on twin concrete bases, some eight feet apart, two statues faced each other. One was of a woman, one a man, and both were execrably executed.

The woman's costume seemed to be some sort of evening gown, but its folds were obscured by the clumsiness with which they had been reproduced. Of her features little could be discerned; the face had been so crudely shaped as to resemble a half-chiseled stone portrait. Only humps and hollows in appropriate places told where eyes and nose and mouth were.

The male figure was as uncouth as the other. Only after looking at it for some time were we able to determine that its clothes were meant to represent a dinner

suit. Like the woman's, his face was little more suggestive of a human countenance than a poorly executed plaster mask.

"Mordieu—quel imparfait!" muttered Jules de Grandin. "They must have been in hot haste, those ones. Me, I could do a better piece of work myself."

For a moment he stood staring at the concrete atrocities, then walked across the gravelly lawn to a partly opened grave. The diggers had left tools beside the trench when they knocked off working for the day, and he took up a pick-ax, weighed it in his hand a moment, then approached the woman's statue.

"My friends," he announced, "here we end our search. *Regardez!"*

The statue swayed upon its base as he struck it with the flat side of the pick, waited for a moment, then struck a second time.

"Hey, what th' devil do you think you're doin'?" stormed the superintendent. "I'll have th' law on you——"

"Take it aisy, feller," soothed Costello. "I'm the law, an' if he wants to bust that thing to pieces you're not goin' to sthop 'im. Git me?"

The Frenchman drew his pick back once more and launched a battering smash against the statue's knees. This time it shattered like a piece of broken crockery, and where a three-foot flake of cement dropped away there showed a stretch of something pale and almost colorless. No need to tell a doctor what it was. Every first-semester student of anatomy knows dead human flesh at sight.

"Good Lord, sor, is it her?" Costello gasped.

"Indubitably it is she, my friend," de Grandin answered. "It is none other than Señora Gutierrez. And that monstrosity"—he pointed toward the other statue with his pick-ax—"conceals her husband. Call your men, *mon Sergent.* Have them take these dreadful things away and break them up, then put the bodies in the city morgue."

"H'm, wonder what they did wid th' other one?" the sergeant asked.

"The servant?" The Frenchman pointed to the disturbed earth between the statues' bases. "I cannot say with certainty, but it is my guess that if you dig there you will find him."

"ONE reconstructs the crime," he told us sometime later at my house. "I was as much at sea as you when first we went into that house where they had taken Señorita Gutierrez and her brother. Coupled with the disappearance of the bodies from the stolen hearse, the spots of paint and plaster on the cellar floor, the airbrushes and the drying-fan should have told me how the corpses had been hidden, but it was not till you found the burying-deed that I had the idea. Even then I thought that they had bought the burial plot and put the bodies in it after casing them in cement so the earth would not cave in upon them too soon and thus disclose their hiding-place.

"But when the superintendent told us of the statues and we looked upon their dreadful crudity, the whole thing became clear to me.

"Toutefois, the credit goes to you, *mon Sergent.* It was you who put the riddle's key into my hands when you showed me that burial-deed. Yes, it is unquestionably so.

"Do not forget to tell them when you make your report to headquarters."

He helped himself to an enormous drink, and:

"Quelle facétie monumentale!" he murmured with a wry face.

"What's a 'monumental joke'?" I demanded.

"Pardieu, the one those so abominable ones played on Colonel Gutierrez and his lady—to make them stand as monuments above their own graves!"

"Mulange stooped low above the system, the glowing web dangling from his outstretched fingers."

Giants in the Sky

By FRANK BELKNAP LONG, Jr.

An imaginative and astonishing tale, about three super-beings from another cosmos, who snared two humans from Earth in their colossal microscope

THE girl and the man were hurtling through the bright Alpine air when the sun vanished. A chill wind blew upon them and utter darkness engulfed them. They thudded to earth, turned over, and groped for each other in blackness.

Their skis swished through the deep snow of the high Alps as they thrashed about. The girl began to sob, her hands

seeking the strong hands of her companion. Presently fingers closed tightly over fingers in the mysterious, terrible dark.

The man sobbed: "Margaret, are you hurt?"

The girl's voice was like a whisper from the tomb. "My face is cut. There is blood on my right temple. Oh, darling, what happened?"

The man's fingers tightened. "I do not know," he groaned. "The sun——"

"An eclipse, Peter?"

The man shook his head. "Impossible. The eclipse of 1940 will not even be visible in Switzerland. And it's mathematically impossible for an eclipse to occur ahead of schedule."

"But why did the sun vanish?"

The man said: "I do not know, Margaret. A cloud, perhaps. A sudden overcasting of the sky."

"But no cloud could form so suddenly."

The man started to reply, then drew in his breath sharply. The darkness was dissolving about them, draining away in thin ripples over the snow-covered slopes.

High in the sky to the east the sun glowed again.

But was it the sun? Utter incredulity engulfed the twain as they stared. High in the sky there glowed a triangular sun, a pale blue luminary that shed a diffuse radiance over the peaks about them and cast long, spectral shadows on the tumbled snow.

"Good God!" muttered the man. He got cumbersomely to his feet, helping the girl up with his right arm and using his left for leverage.

Together they stood entranced, staring at a sun swollen to twice its normal bulk, a sun which hung in the pale heavens like a colossal echinoderm, its trianglar body encircled by thin, wavering prominences of dazzling brilliance.

They remained speechless for an instant. Then the man said: "We'd best be getting back to the château. If this isn't a local phenomenon, reports will be coming in by radio."

The girl's fingers tightened in his clasp. "I don't think it's really the sun. The atmosphere may have distorted light—freakishly, inexplicably. It could be a sort of Brocken Specter, couldn't it? Couldn't it, Peter?"

"I don't know. A Brocken Specter is a funnel of light slanting downward. It's a kind of luminous shadow cast upon a cloud by an observer with his back to the sun, a gigantic and misty image in the sky. It doesn't alter the shape of the sun.

"But it *could* be caused by refraction. Only—it's curious it should happen to us."

Despite his mounting apprehension, the man laughed. "Why, dear?"

"Well, because we're meteorologists. If it's an atmosphere phenomenon, our seeing it at close range is dead against the law of averages."

The man's brow furrowed. "Yes, perhaps. But long-odd coincidences are constantly occurring. Foreign correspondents are usually on hand when wars start, and when someone is murdered there is likely to be a detective Johnny mixed up in it. It's more ironic than surprising. We're not merely meteorologists. We're scientifically minded idealists from the New World, appalled by Europe's descent into barbarism. And now a new sun has risen over Europe and we're watching it from the highest——"

"Please don't jest about it," interposed the girl. "It's too—too startling. I'm terribly frightened, Peter."

The man said: "If I thought it was really up our alley I'd wire in a detailed report to the Smithsonian Institution and take the consequences. I'd be disbelieved, of course. Charles Fort collected volumes of data about phenomena as incredible as this and he was laughed out of court. But let's get under way, dear."

Slowly they descended through the heavy snow, holding fast to each other and silent again, fear and apprehension having fastened on their inmost souls.

The shadow fell so unobtrusively across their path that they were completely unaware of it until it dimmed the light about them.

The girl saw it first. She cried out and recoiled in trepidation from a swelling, amorphous blot that darkened the snow beneath them. With appalling swiftness the blot rose and flowed toward them, coiling about their limbs like a writhing taint.

In the depths of the shadow something flashed. Bright and swift as a naked crag emerging from snow in a glacial landslide it smote and sundered the twain, hurling the man backward across the snow and lifting the girl from the mountainside.

The girl shrieked and threw out her arms as the bright object curved about her. It enmeshed her limbs and lifted her so swiftly from Earth that when the man picked himself up she was a whirling mote receding into the sky, a dancing midge gleaming in the rays of the new and incredible sun.

All about him the wind roared and the snow stirred in mysterious travail. There was a roaring in his ears, an adumbration of half-light that chilled his heart like ice. The entire mountain quaked and trembled. The slope buckled, throwing him forward upon his face and half burying him in snow.

He lay moaning and helpless while all about him nature unleashed her furies.

Then, slowly, the mysterious turbulence subsided. The wind died down and the ground ceased to quiver. But though the elements resumed their wonted calm, an aura of intangible menace seemed still to hover over the high Alps, and the silence which ensued was more ghastly than any sound.

2

IN THE wan light of the red giant sun the planet Icurus spun steadily on its axis, despite the new world which rested on its bosom. The new world was no larger than the pebbles on the beaches of Icurian seas. It revolved on its own tiny axis, and close to it was its own moon revolving. All about it was a nebulous aurora which streamed outward in luminous waves.

The planet Icurus was billions of miles in circumference, but the midget planet which reposed upon it had a mean semidiameter of less than four thousand miles. The midget planet was a very weird little world indeed.

Its continents were green with vegetation and black with the concretions of intelligent life. Thousands of animal forms swam and crawled and flew in its waste places and teeming hinterlands, but primarily it was a world of intelligent bipeds who had built beneath the stars titanic concretions of metal and stone.

It had but one satellite, a pale, silvery orb which revolved in the sky two hundred thousand miles from its periphery. The satellite was curious too. It was devoid of water and atmosphere and its entire surface was pitted as though it had collided in space with thousands of Gargantuan meteors.

To the Great Shapes who contemplated that little moon and its green and watery primary on the planet Icurus space was not bounded by the familiar constellations of man. Island universes invisible to earthly telescopes stretched out endlessly above them to the rim of space.

The Great Shapes were clustered about the little, alien globe under the wan light of the red giant sun Lutal. Glowing with reflected sunlight they stood motionlessly in a circle about the aurora-enveloped new world which was smaller than the tiniest

firestone or light-concretion. Above them arched a transparent dome of cyclopean dimensions. Fashioned of glowing crystal it spanned the Icurian landscape for millions of miles in all directions.

The Great Shapes were thousands of miles tall. Vaguely man-like in contour, they loomed beneath the great dome in somber silhouette. The glowing rays of Lutal caressed and enveloped them, but beneath the surface-shimmer of the red sun's rays was a curious, weaving opacity which encroached on the brightness, sending rifts of darkness cascading across their stooped shoulders and titan limbs.

The little spinning globe beneath them was revolving about a flaming cube that hung suspended in space. Thousands of miles above the surface of the planet Icurus, but beneath the dome and the Great Shapes' downcast gaze, was a tiny planetary system. Enveloped in a tenuous haze, bisected by auroral beams, nine planets were continuously revolving.

More curious in some respects than the little globe which was absorbing their attention were three of these planets. One was almost as large as the central cube and encircled by a wide, fiery band and ten little moons of almost microscopic dimensions. Another was a dull, mottled globe companioned by four large and five small moons and displaying near its equator a motionless splotch of cloud-vapor as red as a bloodstone. The third was rust-colored, and covered with a fine network of thread-like lines which snaked tenuously in all directions.

One of the Great Shapes stirred suddenly, moving its limbs about and raising its head in the Lutal glow. The face that he turned skyward was gray and corrugated. To human perception it would have seemed a repulsive face, but it was not without symmetry, and the individual features hinted at inscrutable endowments of intelligence and power.

The Shape's eyes were on stalks which projected hundreds of miles from the summit of its countenance. Its nose was a flat, triangular depression a thousand miles in diameter and its mouth was a puckered orifice, the outer circumference of which was constantly in motion.

The Great Shape moved slowly in a circle about his companions, his face upraised in contemplation of the shining vault above him. Directly overhead the giant red sun glowed sanguineously in the star-hung firmament, its colossal prominences tapering to the zenith like the radiating arms of some celestial echinoderm. The sky was a sickly cadaverous green, shot through with diffuse shafts of rose and saffron.

There were three Great Shapes about the tiny revolving system. Slowly they shed their immobility, stirring their cyclopean limbs, raising their projecting eyes and regarding each other somberly beneath the dome.

THE moving one was the first to speak. He stopped suddenly in his pacing, and his voice pealed out sonorously amidst the silences.

"It is not a negligible achievement to have traveled to the mysterious center of the mysterious universe, and ensnared an entire planetary system in the shell-nimbus of our radiant absorption nets. With miraculous skill we have preserved this system intact, removing only the central sun and substituting a radiating metatom."

He paused an instant, then resumed: "I remember gazing from the observation cylinder when our great vessel clove the intergalactic abyss, traveling back to Lutal through the glowing pores of space. Gloriously we returned from our perilous pilgrimage, our absorption tubes glowing in the light of a million million suns, our absorption nets trailing out behind us.

"I remember gazing from the observa-

tion cylinder, and watching the little, luminous system revolving in the net far behind us. I was proud, proud! I felt that we were akin to the eternal. I spoke of our voyage as a pilgrimage. It was certainly that, a pilgrimage to the mysterious core of the mysterious universe.

"To the Great Architect we must have seemed audacious indeed. But the desire to know, to understand, is so deeply ingrained in us that—well, I feel somehow that it was implanted in us to serve some sublime purpose, some truly cosmic aim."

Another of the Great Shapes spoke then, his voice sonorous with emotion: "That is true, Mulange. Our journey to the core of space was a pilgrimage to an inner shrine, and in making it we drew close to the eternal. We know now that the universe is wonderful beyond description in all its parts, even to the tiniest planet revolving about the tiniest sun."

The one called Mulange said: "I cannot think we did wrong in capturing this strange little system and establishing it here on Icurus in our knowledge vault. But we must not preen ourselves unduly. We returned too swiftly through the space-pores. We should have permitted a little *time* to seep in through the absorption tubes. In returning timelessly, we ruptured the central sun.

"I saw it rupture when we were almost at our journey's end. Before it could destroy the nine little planets I removed it from the system, drawing it by convexial suction from the absorption net, and substituting a metatom in its place."

A third Shape began to pace about, cyclopean shoulders hunched in meditation. "You acted with rare presence of mind, Mulange. The system is still intact. It is only the pathetic little bipeds of Earth who are disturbed by the change."

Mulange said: "*Earth.* I wonder if we pronounce that strange monosyllable correctly. Earth."

"The magnification was ten million times," said the second Shape. "It is true that the auditory magnification disk does not function accurately when the sounds are grating, but the Earth-biped has a clear, bell-like voice."

"I should like to examine the Earth-biped again," said Mulange. "It is a most fascinating creature, Shalaan."

The second Shape said: "Yes—well, we can do that."

The third Shape was less massive than Mulange, and had a curiously smooth-textured face. She gave her companions a quick, reproving glance from her stalked eyes, and was suddenly still.

"Mulange is a fool," she said. "The Earth-biped is fascinating as an object of study. But Mulange broods over it. He pities it, and talks to it as though it were an Icurian."

Mulange said: "I was compelled to observe it over a long period of time, Lulalan. How else could I have fathomed its curious, sibilant language? Fortunately it has a habit of talking to itself."

Shalaan said: "It is obviously terrified. I do not think the Earth-bipeds ordinarily talk to themselves."

"Its behavior is peculiar and disturbing," agreed Lulalan.

Mulange said: "Removing it from near the summit of the Earth-mountain was no simple task. When I reached down amid the teeming millions of its kind with micro-nets designed for sport-dredging in the infinitely less minute matrix of a Spaalon colony and captured it alive and unharmed I was filled with elation. When I withdrew the net I thought that the terrible acceleration would kill it. But apparently it can endure an acceleration of eight kutas a cilolan. As soon as I lifted it free of Earth's atmosphere I dropped it into an absorption net and transferred it timelessly to the observation membrane of the magnification tube."

Shalaan said: "Let us examine it again, Mulange."

SLOWLY the three Shapes drew together until they were standing somberly abreast beneath the red giant sun. They remained for an instant immobile, the blood-hued rays caressing their titan bodies and lowered heads. Then in single file they strode ponderously away across the dome.

A luminous mist swirled up about them as they receded from the little, haze-suspended system and progressed through a glowing void which was bounded above by the pale sheen of the dome and beneath by the black, crater-pitted soil of the planet Icurus.

The cyclopean magnification tube loomed obscurely out of the mist. Thousands of miles in circumference, it towered from the pitted soil in rugose segments which gleamed dully in the Lutal light. From its tapering summit there projected a gigantic horizontal disk studded with innumerable tiny depressions, and marginal elevations of sanguinary hue.

In utter silence the Shapes grouped themselves about the great tube, their projecting eyes roving in all directions, their cyclopean arms continuously in motion.

Mulange was the first to speak. "I hope that it has consumed all the food I placed on the observation disk," he said. "It will feed only on minute globules of the creeping green Earth-life."

Lulalan nodded and lowered her great, wrinkled face until it was within a few thousand miles of the summit of the tube. Waveringly her stalked eye descended and glued itself to the instrument of science.

She stared for a moment down into a filmy opacity thousands of miles in depth. Then her titan hands went out and fastened on the uppermost segment of the tube.

"We shall see," she said, and began twisting the segment about with her fingers. Slowly the opacity dissolved, becoming crystal-clear. In the depths of the glowing instrument a tiny shape sprang suddenly into view.

The Earth-woman was sitting cross-legged in the center of the observation membrane, her head bent sharply forward, her long auburn hair descending to her knees. Only her bent back and slender limbs were visible to Lulalan's downward-peering gaze.

Lulalan removed her eye from the tube and murmured: "All the food is gone, Mulange."

Mulange exclaimed joyously: "Then it will live, Lulalan! As you know, it refused nourishment at first. Then it fed voraciously, and refused nourishment again.. But if *all* the food is gone——"

"An encouraging sign, of course," interposed Shalaan. "But we must not be too optimistic."

Mulange moved closer to the tube, his great, corrugated face twitching with emotion. He did not even glance at Lulalan. In tremulous haste he shouldered his companions aside, and his stalked eyes descended swiftly, converging at the summit of the tube.

Lulalan said: "You see, Shalaan. He must look at it with both eyes, as though it were a dear companion. He must see it in relief, because it is lovely in his sight. Oh, I am bereft, Shalaan."

Mulange ignored her. He was looking down at the little shape, his face glowing with tenderness and rapture.

The Earth-woman seemed suddenly to become aware of the great eye millions of miles above her. She stirred on the membrane and raised her pale face. For a moment she remained staring upward, seeing only a white, starless sky-vault and a colossal shadow which merged with the fathomlessness of alien space.

Then she got gropingly to her feet. Swaying and moaning, she raised her puny

hands and drew back the hair from her countenance, dividing it into two silky strands. Her eyes were dark, tormented.

Mulange murmured: "Poor, pitiful little one. If only I could comfort you!"

Shalaan shrugged impatiently. "Lulalan is right, Mulange. You are really ill."

Mulange did not reply. He was watching the little form stagger across the membrane, arms upraised in pitiful appeal.

From the projecting disk at the summit of the tube a despairful cry issued. "Peter! Peter!"

To Mulange, who saw the Earth-woman's lips move, the voice which issued from the auditory magnification disk was poignantly moving—a tragic, intimate cry. But to his companions it was merely an interesting amplification of sound—a startlingly clear magnification of an Earth-biped's micro-speech.

"It is always using that monosyllable," said Shalaan. *"Peter.* Perhaps Peter is another name for Earth."

Mulange raised his eyes from the tube, his great face wan with compassion. "If I could bring her *Peter,"* he said.

"I'm weary of watching you brood over it," said Shalaan irritably. "If I were Lulalan I would seek another companion."

Lulalan bent her head. Mulange drew close to her, his elephantine footfalls echoing across the dome.

"Do not grieve, Lulalan," he murmured tenderly. "It is a momentary madness. It will pass. The deep affection which unites us is indestructible, and we shall remain dear companions until we die."

Shalaan said: "This is all very annoying. I prefer the company of our nine little planets."

Abruptly he turned and strode away across the dome.

Lulalan said: "I pity you, Mulange. You are weak and foolish."

Mulange made no attempt to detain her when she followed Shalaan into the mist. He stood straight a moment beside the tube, his enormous face grief-shadowed. He knew the wonder of Lulalan, and his need of her was great. But in his titan body a strange madness surged.

Within the tube was a speck of animate matter tinier than the mist-grains which clogged the nuclei of light-concretions invisible to his naked vision. Yet that minute speck was infinitely precious in his sight.

SLOWLY he bent again and applied his eye to the summit of the tube.

The Earth-woman was lying at full length on the observation membrane, her tiny form racked with sobs. Her long hair was spread out fanwise over her slender body, enmeshing its whiteness in a red-gold web that glimmered under the stupendous magnification with little wavering coruscations of light.

"Do not grieve, little one," Mulange murmured. "I will watch over you and protect you."

Out of the mist boomed a sonorous voice. "Mulange, come here. The most extraordinary light has appeared on the planet Earth."

Mulange straightened abruptly, his colossal limbs jerking in sudden wonder. Casting upon the tube a look of infinite tenderness and yearning, he turned about and strode swiftly forward through the mist.

Lulalan and Shalaan were grouped about the little revolving system, their light-aureoled heads down-bent when he came striding toward them out of the Lutal glow.

Lulalan raised sorrow-filmed eyes and looked at him accusingly, her great body tremulous with grief. But Shalaan's eyes were shining. He seemed very excited indeed.

"We were watching Earth when we saw a blinding flash of light," he said, "a brilliant white flare which obscured the polar

continent. It lingered an instant, then vanished."

Mulange said: "One of Earth's fire-belching cones, perhaps. An eruption of the planet's interior heat."

Lulalan said: "We have watched five of the cones in eruption. The flames were less fugitive, less brilliant. No, this was an unique eruption."

"Well, we shall see," said Mulange.

He turned abruptly, and strode away through the mist. When he returned he was clutching in his gigantic hand a small, fine-textured web that glowed iridescently in the Lutal light.

"We shall dredge above the region of the eruption with a micro-net," he said.

Shalaan said: "An excellent idea, Mulange. But you must float the net down gradually. The little fleecy atmosphere concretions near the planet's surface will clog its pores unless you manipulate it with great skill and precision."

"I will not dredge in the lower atmosphere," replied Mulange. "If the eruption really was violent and extensive, we shall find debris scattered in the tenuous vapor-strata high above the plant's crust."

Shalaan lowered his stalked eyes in assent. "I understand, Mulange. It is even conceivable that you will find debris out beyond the plant's satellite. Would it not be wise to simply lower the net and sweep it in a wide arc through space?"

Lulalan said: "Perhaps we should examine the region under a small magnification tube first, probe with sight into the vapor-strata. You succeeded very well when you examined the little bipeds' habitations through the tube."

Mulange said: "Yes, but the tube looms menacingly in their skies. They are sufficiently terrified already."

"I believe we shall succeed better with the net," agreed Shalaan. "Lower it, Mulange."

Mulange stooped low above the system, the glowing web dangling from his outstretched fingers. Bending his gaze on the Earth, he floated the porous snare down slowly, manipulating it with such skill that it was soon dangling directly above the little, spinning planet. Slowly his great hand moved to and fro in the Lutal light.

"Are you dredging beyond the satellite?" asked Shalaan, peering curiously over Mulange's hunched shoulders.

Mulange raised one of his stalked eyes and bent its vision backward into Shalaan's gray shadowy face. The other eye he kept trained on Earth.

"Yes, Shalaan. I am simply sweeping the net back and forth as you suggested."

Suddenly his great body began to quiver. He remained in a stooping posture, but his hand ceased to move, and the eye that was trained on Shalaan's face straightened out and coiled downward to join its companion.

Lulalan said: "What is it, Mulange? You haven't ensnared the satellite?"

Mulange raised his great face suddenly.

"The net is heavier," he said. "I have either enmeshed a large firestone, or some debris from the eruption. We shall know presently."

Shalaan and Lulalan stood very still, watching him as he maneuvered the net out of the planet-studded haze and held it up in the Lutal glow. Its iridescent meshes cascaded over the vast gray hollow of his hand like waves breaking on an Icurian beach.

Six stalked eyes studied the net as it rested on his titan palm. Four stalked eyes turned away bewildered, their vision frustrated by the web's glowing sheen. Only Mulange remained steadfastly staring, his face impassively raised a few thousand miles from the Lutal-reddened meshes.

Suddenly he said: "Yes, there is a tiny object in the net. It is larger than a firestone, but I cannot distinguish it clearly."

"Then we must place it under the magnification tube," said Shalaan.

Lulalan spoke then for the first time. "We will place it on the disk with the Earth-biped," she said.

Slowly Mulange lowered his hand. "How can we be sure that it will not harm her?" he exclaimed, apprehension in his tone.

Shalaan said: "If it is not radiant, it will not harm her. Enough of this foolishness, Mulange."

Somberly the Great Shapes drew together again and returned in silence to the tube.

Mulange seemed reluctant to relinquish the web. He stood with stooped shoulders before the great instrument, holding the web on his palm, his eyes focussed on Shalaan's rugose face.

He was reluctant to oppose Shalaan. Shalaan was the oldest living Icurian—and the wisest. No one had ever opposed Shalaan.

Lulalan said: "Give me the net, Mulange. I will insert it in the tube."

Mulange's great body seemed to droop. He extended his hand and turned away, his face quivering.

Lulalan held the net firmly between her fingers and squatted in the red Lutal light, fumbling with her free hand at the base of the tube. The tube's lowermost segment divided at her touch. As though by magic fission its cylindrical bulk became two gleaming half-cones. Lulalan let the net slip from her fingers and stood up. Instantly the half-cones coalesced again.

The interior mechanism of the tube was complex and ingenious. The dropped web was automatically sucked into a defining vortex and transferred to the observation membrane with microscopic precision.

Lulalan regarded Mulange for an instant in silence. Then she said: "Examine it, Mulange. I can see that you are tormented by misgivings."

Quivering, Mulange's stalked eyes descended and glued themselves to the summit of the tube. The magnification mechanism was still adjusted to his vision. With startling clarity the observation membrane came into view in the glimmering depths of the tube.

3

THERE were now two objects on the membrane. The Earth-woman was standing quiveringly erect under crystal-bright skies, her tiny body enveloped in a red-gold glory, her pale face suffused with wonder. A short distance away a long cylindrical shape rested slantwise on the slide, its glowing bulk enmeshed in the porous, shimmering folds of the micro-net.

The shining cylinder dwarfed the Earth-woman's minikin form and cast faint, irregular shadows on the polished surface of the membrane. The entire lateral surface of the cylinder was studded with tiny, knob-like elevations which revolved continuously in the crystalline radiance that flooded the interior of the tube.

Suddenly, as Mulange stared, one of these elevations ceased to rotate. Its circumference contracted and a wide band of light streamed outward from its extremity across the cylinder's bulk.

The Earth-woman was moving now. Her eyes strangely luminous, she was advancing toward the cylinder with faltering steps.

From the light-rimmed projection a tiny form emerged. Leaping abruptly into view, it stood aureoled in the upstreaming glow. Though it was no larger than the Earth-woman, its contours were grotesque. Its head was a shining ebon globe, its limbs segmented and awkwardly dangling. In the center of its bulbous face a single eye glowed dully.

The figure had emerged near the tapering extremity of the cylinder. Beneath it was a gleaming convexity which sloped gradually to the surface of the membrane. Above it arched the glistening meshes of the micro-net.

When the Earth-woman reached the base

of the cylinder her slender hands darted to her throat. She swayed a little and stood staring up through the crystalline glow at the tiny, segmented baroque far above her.

Slowly the little form started down the sloping surface of the cylinder, its body slanting backward, its globular head bobbing curiously on its shoulders.

Although the cylinder's surface was slightly corrugated, the descent was a perilous one. Twice the little figure stumbled and nearly fell. But with slow, unwieldy movements it regained its precarious balance and continued to move downward, arriving at last at the base of the cylinder where the Earth-woman was waiting.

For an instant it stood very still regarding her, its grotesque body swaying from side to side. Then it raised tiny, claw-like hands and clutched at its globular head.

A pulsing horror quivered through Mulange's great body.

The little shape was removing its head. Slowly it lifted the gleaming globe in the crystalline glow, slowly it shed its segmented outer skin. Slowly and incredibly at the base of the cylinder the little shape emerged transformed from its coverings.

Standing before the Earth-woman at the base of the cylinder was a tiny Earth-man, a strange dazzlement in his eyes, his body quivering with emotion.

The Earth-woman was quivering too—quivering, sobbing! "Peter! Peter! Oh, my darling, my dear one!"

The thing which happened then was utterly incomprehensible to Mulange. The Earth-man cried out exultantly, caught the Earth-woman in his arms, and pressed his face with incredible vehemence against her hair and lips and eyes.

It was incomprehensible to Mulange. And yet—all the stars of heaven seemed to go out as he stared. All his world grew dark about him, abysmally, shudderingly dark. Even Lutal ceased to warm him.

The Earth-man was murmuring softly: "I thought I was going to my death. But we had to know. We had to know what had happened to our universe. All the stars were gone, and the sun—the sun was alien and strange, a radiant cube in the heavens, an unfathomable field of force.

"With Governmental backing the Smithsonian Institution constructed a rocket, enlisting the aid of our foremost scientists and engineers, and raising funds by popular subscription.

"I volunteered my services, Margaret. I offered to pilot the rocket. Three days ago I was shot away from Earth's southern pole at a constantly accelerating speed. When I passed the heavy-side layer, automatic controls regulated the power, reducing it again to the square of the distance which I——"

Mulange did not linger to hear more. Slowly he withdrew his gaze from the magnification tube, his great body drooping, quivering. He did not look at his companions. Tormented, despairing, he stumbled blindly away through the mist.

Lutal was low in the heavens when Lulalan found him. He was lying sprawled out at full length on the pitted soil, his limbs twisted about the crater-like nest of an Icurian tube creeper, his cyclopean shoulders tremulous in the waning sunlight.

Lulalan stood for an instant gazing down at him, her great, wrinkled face luminous with compassion.

Then she knelt and began tenderly to stroke his back.

"Do not grieve, Mulange," she murmured. "We are together again. We shall be dear companions until we die."

Slowly Mulange stirred. He untwined his limbs, turned ponderously about, and raised his face in the red glow.

"I need you, Lulalan," he murmured. "Without you, my life would be desolate indeed."

Lulalan said: "I will never leave you, Mulange."

IN THE depths of the great magnifying-instrument the man and the girl stared upward at an alien sky, their fingers intertwined in the mysterious, terrible light.

The man said: "We must not despair, Margaret. Our dream of love is a great, eternal dream. Our little lives may be snuffed out, but we have experienced a fulfilment which time cannot mar nor space destroy."

The girl nodded, her eyes misting. "I do not think we shall perish, Peter. I feel somehow that we have come too far, that our reunion is—a sort of miracle, Peter. We shall travel farther perhaps, and for a little while darkness may come between us again.

"But nothing is ever lost in space or time. Oh, I am sure of that!"

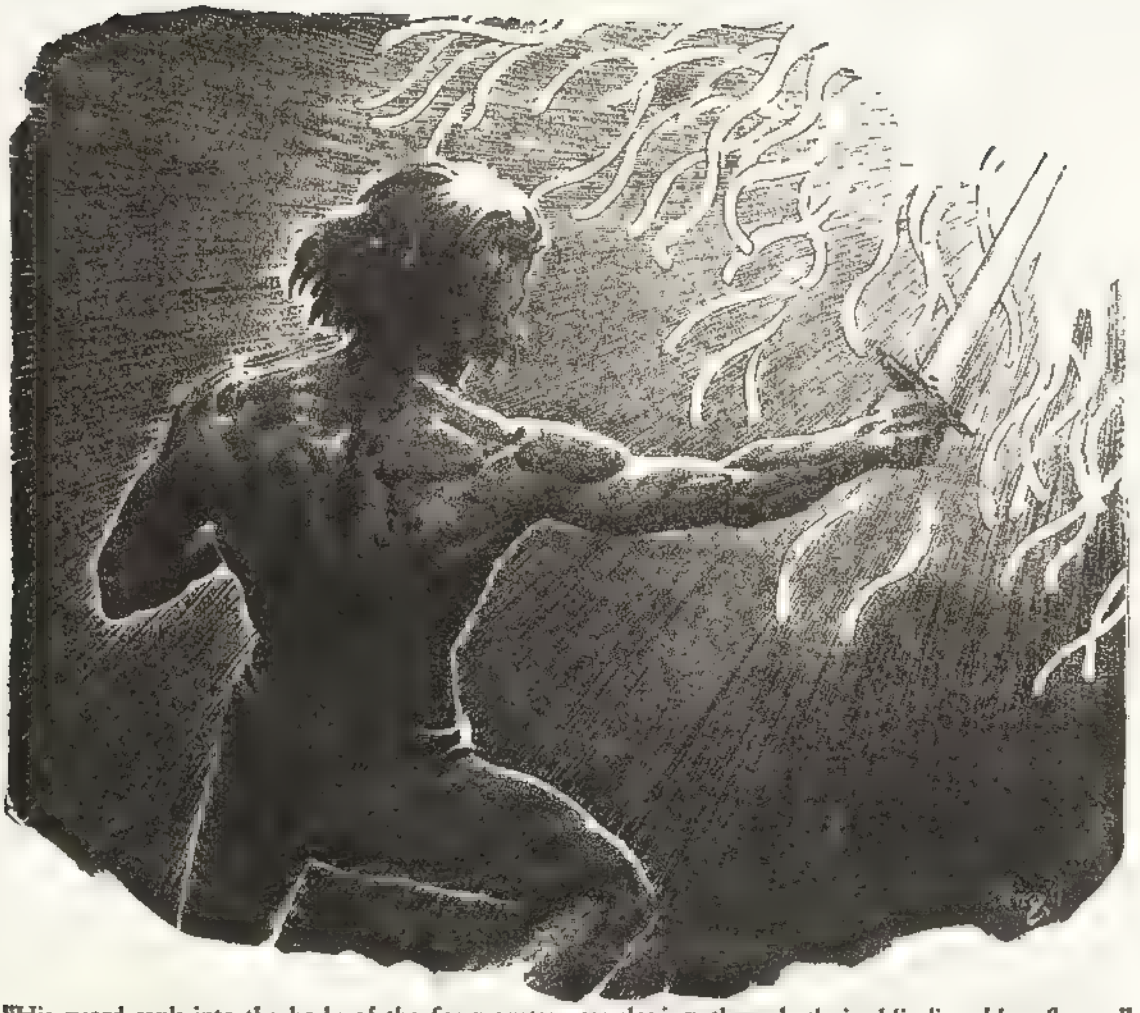
The man smiled and kissed her and drew her into his arms. And as they clung together the light in the depths of the great tube seemed to brighten about them, and their apprehension vanished like blown vapor.

Dupin and Another

By VINCENT STARRETT

"Here is the dusk again; the friendly night!
Unbar the shutters, Edgar, and look down:
See how the shadows stir with knave and clown—
Fugitive nomads from the hours of light,
Each on his private mischief bent. The day
Will look perhaps on figures just as ill—
Some stiff, cold corpse, fantastically still;
Something that lives and screams and runs away.

Mark how the darkness writhes: this stealthy murk,
Damp from its river crossings, blows a breath
Of evil import; and outrageous death
Slinks in the shades where bawds and lovers lurk. . . .
Shall we descend and, if the night permits,
Seek some small problem to perplex our wits?"



"His sword sank into the body of the fire-monster, enveloping them both in blinding blue flames."

Almuric

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

An amazing story from the best of a master of weird fiction, which begins on our own planet and ends in the demon-haunted world Almuric

The Story Thus Far

ESAU CAIRN, the strongest athlete on Earth, kills the political boss of his city, and flees for protection to the laboratory of Professor Hildebrand. That great scientist has recently discovered the Great Secret—how to transport living beings to other planets by dematerializing them. He sends Esau to a distant world known as Almuric.

Esau lives for several months in the Hills, populated by weird animal forms

against which he wages continual war. He finally leaves the Hills, and is captured by the ape-like men of a city of black rock, known as Koth. The Kothan women are smooth-skinned and beautiful like those of our own world but the men are shaggy-haired and great-muscled, and live by hunting.

Esau is taken into the tribe after a terrific duel with Ghor, the strongest of the Kothans. He is given the name of Esau Ironhand for his mighty feat in vanquishing Ghor, who now becomes his staunchest friend.

The planet is divided into two hemispheres by a great natural wall of stone, and weird winged people live on the farther hemisphere. While trying to rescue Altha, whose father is chief of the Kothans, Esau is captured and carried through the air to the black city of horror known as Yugga, and ruled by a dusky queen named Yasmeena. Altha is made a slave to Yasmeena.

Esau's smooth white skin and blue eyes excite the interest of the winged ruler.

The story continues:

PART III

MUCH I learned of the ways of that terrible people, who have reigned over Almuric since ages beyond the memory of man. They might have been human once, long ago, but I doubt it. I believe they represented a separate branch on the tree of evolution, and that it is only an incredible freak of coincidence which cast them in a mold so similar to man, instead of the shapes of the abysmal, howling, blasphemous dwellers of Outer Darkness.

In many ways they seemed, superficially, human enough, but if one followed their lines of consciousness far enough, he would come upon phases inexplicable and alien to humanity. As far as pure intellect went, they were superior to the hairy Guras. But they lacked altogether the decency, honesty, courage, and general manliness of the apemen. The Guras were quick to wrath, savage and brutal in their anger; but there was a studied cruelty about the Yagas which made the others seem like mere rough children. The Yagas were merciless in their calmest moments; roused to anger, their excesses were horrible to behold.

They were a numerous horde, the warriors alone numbering some twenty thousand. There were more women than men, and with their slaves, of which each male and female Yaga possessed a goodly number, the city of Yugga was fully occupied. Indeed, I was surprised to learn of the multitudes of people who dwelt there, considering the comparative smallness of the rock Yuthla on which the city was built. But its space was greater vertically than horizontally. The castles and towers soared high into the air, and several tiers of chambers and corridors were sunk into the rock itself. When the Yagas felt themselves crowded for space, they simply butchered their slaves. I saw no children; losses in war were comparatively slight, and plagues and diseases unknown. Children were produced only at regular intervals, some three centuries apart. The last flock had come of age; the next brood was somewhere in the dim distance of the future.

The lords of Yugga did no sort of work, but passed their lives in sensual pleasures. Their knowledge and adeptness at debauchery would have shamed the most voluptuous libertine in later Rome. Their debauches were interrupted only by raids on the outer world in order to procure women slaves.

The town at the foot of the cliff was called Akka, the blue people Akki, or Akkas. They had been subject to the Yagas as far back as tradition extended. They were merely stupid work-animals, laboring in the irrigated fields of fruits and edible plants, and otherwise doing the

will of their masters, whom they considered superior beings, if not veritable gods. They worshipped Yasmeena as a deity. Outside of continual toil, they were not mistreated. Their women were ugly and beast-like. The winged people had a keen esthetic sense, though their interest in the beauty of the lower orders was sadistic and altogether beastly. The Akkas never came into the upper city, except when there was work to be done there, too heavy for the women slaves. Then they ascended and descended by means of great silken ladders let down from the rock. There was no road leading up from below, since the Yagas needed none. The cliffs could not be scaled; so the winged people had no fear of an Akka uprising.

The Yaga women were likewise prisoners on the rock Yuthla. Their wings were carefully removed at birth. Only the infants destined to become queens of Yugga were spared. This was done in order to keep the male sex in supremacy, and indeed, I was never able to learn how, and at what distant date, the men of Yugga gained supremacy over their women; for, judging from Yasmeena, the winged women were superior to their mates in agility, endurance, courage and even in strength. Clipping their wings kept them from developing their full superiority.

Yasmeena was an example of what a winged woman could be. She was taller than the other Yaga females, who in turn were taller than the Gura women, and though voluptuously shaped, the steel thews of a wildcat lurked in her slender rounded limbs. She was young—all the women of Yugga looked young. The average life-span of the Yaga was nine hundred years. Yasmeena had reigned over Yugga for four hundred years. Three winged princesses of royal blood had contested with her for the right to rule, and she had slain each of them, fighting with naked hands in the regal octagonal chamber. As long as she could defend her crown against younger claimants, she would rule.

THE lot of the slaves in Yugga was hideous. None ever knew when she would be dismembered for the cooking-pot, and the lives of all were tormented by the cruel whims of their masters and mistresses. Yugga was as like Hell as any place could be. I do not know what went on in the palaces of the nobles and warriors, but I do know what took place daily in the palace of the Queen. There was never a day or night that those dusky walls did not re-echo screams of agony and piteous wails for mercy, mingled with vindictive maledictions, or lascivious laughter.

I never became accustomed to it, hard as I was physically and mentally. I think the only thing that kept me from going mad was the feeling that I must keep my sanity in order to protect Altha if I could. That was precious little: I was chained in my chamber; where the Kothan girl was, I had not the slightest idea, except that she was somewhere in the palace of Yasmeena, where she was protected from the lust of the winged men, but not from the cruelty of her mistress.

In Yugga I heard sounds and saw sights not to be repeated—not even to be remembered in dreams. Men and women, the Yagas were open and candid in their evil. Their utter cynicism banished ordinary scruples of modesty and common decency. Their bestialities were naked, unhidden and shameless. They followed their desires with one another, and practised their tortures on their wretched slaves with no attempt at concealment. Deeming themselves gods, they considered themselves above the considerations that guide ordinary humans. The women were more vicious than the men, if such a thing were possible. The refinements of their cruelties toward their trembling slaves cannot

be even hinted at. They were versed in every art of torture, both mental and physical. But enough. I can but hint at what is unrepeatable.

Those days of captivity seem like a dim nightmare. I was not badly treated, personally. Each day I was escorted on a sort of promenade about the palace—something on the order of giving a confined animal exercise. I was always accompanied by seven or eight warriors armed to the teeth, and always wore my chains. Several times on these promenades I saw Altha, going about her duties, but she always averted her gaze and hurried by. I understood, and made no attempt to speak to her. I had placed her in jeopardy already by speaking of her to Yasmeena. Better let the Queen forget about her, if possible. Slaves were safest when the Queen of Yagg remembered them least.

Somewhere, somehow, I found in me power to throttle my red rage and blind fury. When my very brain reeled with the lust to break my chains and explode into a holocaust of slaughter, I held myself with iron grasp. And the fury ate inward into my soul, crystallizing my hate. So the days passed, until the night that Yasmeena again sent for me.

10

YASMEENA cupped her chin in her slim hands and fixed her great dark eyes on me. We were alone in a chamber I had never entered before. It was night. I sat on a divan opposite her, my limbs unshackled. She had offered me temporary freedom if I would promise not to harm her, and to go back into shackles when she bade me. I had promised. I was never a clever man, but my hate had sharpened my wits. I was playing a game of my own.

"What are you thinking of, Esau Ironhand?" she asked.

"I'm thirsty," I answered.

She indicated a crystal vessel near at hand. "Drink a little of the golden wine—not much, or it will make you drunk. It is the most powerful drink in the world. Not even I can quaff that vessel without lying senseless for hours. And you are unaccustomed to it."

I sipped a little of it. It was indeed heady liquor.

Yasmeena stretched her limbs out on her couch, and asked: "Why do you hate me? Have I not treated you well?"

"I have not said that I hated you," I countered. "You are very beautiful. But you are cruel."

She shrugged her winged shoulders. "Cruel? I am a goddess. What have I to do with either cruelty or mercy? Those qualities are for men. Humanity exists for my pleasure. Does not all life emanate from me?"

"Your stupid Akkis may believe that," I replied; "but I know otherwise, and so do you."

She laughed, not offended. "Well, I may not be able to create life, but I can destroy life at will. I may not be a goddess, but you would find it difficult to convince these foolish wenches who serve me that I am not all-powerful. No, Ironhand; the gods are only another name for *Power.* I am Power on this planet; so I am a goddess. What do your hairy friends, the Guras, worship?"

"They worship Thak; at least they acknowledge Thak as the creator and preserver. They have no regular ritual of worship, no temples, altars or priests. Thak is the Hairy One, the god in the form of man. He bellows in the tempest, and thunders in the hills with the voice of the lion. He loves brave men, and hates weaklings, but he neither harms nor aids. When a male child is born, he blows into it courage and strength; when a warrior dies, he ascends to Thak's abode, which is a land of celestial plains, rivers and moun-

tains, swarming with game, and inhabited by the spirits of departed warriors, who hunt, fight and revel forever as they did in life."

She laughed. "Stupid pigs. Death is oblivion. We Yagas worship only our own bodies. And to our bodies we make rich sacrifices with the bodies of the foolish little people."

"Your rule cannot last forever," I was moved to remark.

"It *has* lasted since beyond the gray dawn of Time's beginning. On the dark rock Yuthla my people have brooded through ages uncountable. Before the cities of the Guras dotted the plains, we dwelt in the land of Yagg. We were always masters. As we rule the Guras, so we ruled the mysterious race which possessed the land before the Guras evolved from the ape: the race which reared their cities of marble whose ruins now affright the moon, and which perished in the night.

"Tales! I could tell you tales to blast your reason! I could tell you of races which appeared from the mist of mystery, moved across the world in restless waves, and vanished in the midst of oblivion. We of Yugga have watched them come and go, each in turn bending beneath the yoke of our godship. We have endured, not centuries or millenniums, but cycles.

"Why should not our rule endure forever? How shall these Gura-fools overcome us? You have seen how it is when my hawks swoop from the air in the night on the cities of the apemen. How then shall they attack us in our eyrie? To reach the land of Yagg they must cross the Purple River, whose waters race too swiftly to be swum. Only at the Bridge of Rocks can it be crossed, and there keen-eyed guards watch night and day. The watchers brought word of their coming and the men of Yagg were prepared. In the midst of the desert they fell on the invaders and destroyed them by thirst and madness and arrows showering upon them from the skies.

"Suppose a horde should fight its way through the desert and reach the rock Yuthla? They have the river Yogh to cross, and when they have crossed it, in the teeth of the Akki spears, what then? They could not scale the cliffs. No; no foreign foe will ever set foot in Yugga. If, by the wildest whim of the gods, such thing *should* come to pass"—her beautiful features became even more cruel and sinister—"rather than submit to conquest I would loose the *Ultimate Horror,* and perish in the ruins of my city," she whispered, more to herself than to me.

"What do you say?" I asked, not understanding.

She lifted her head and fixed me with an enigmatic stare.

"There are secrets beneath the velvet coverings of the darkest secrets," she said. "Tread not where the very gods tremble. I said nothing—you heard nothing. Remember that!"

There was silence for a space, and then I asked a question I had long mulled over: "Whence come these red girls and yellow girls among your slaves?"

"You have looked southward from the highest towers on clear days, and seen a faint blue line rimming the sky far away? That is the Girdle that bands the world. Beyond that Girdle dwell the races from which come those alien slaves. We raid across the Girdle just as we raid the Guras, though less frequently."

I WAS about to ask more concerning these unknown races, when a timid tap came on the outer door. Yasmeena, frowning at the interruption, called a sharp question, and a frightened feminine voice informed her that the lord Gotrah desired audience. Yasmeena spat an oath at her, and bade her tell the lord Gotrah to go to the devil.

"No, I must see the fellow," she said, rising. "Theta! Oh, Theta! Where has the little minx gone? I must do my own biddings, must I? Her buttocks shall smart for her insolence. Wait here, Ironhand. I'll see to Gotrah."

She crossed the cushion-strewn chamber with her lithe long stride, and passed through the door. As it closed behind her, I was struck by what was nothing less than an inspiration. No especial reason occurred to me to urge me to feign drunkenness. It was intuition or blind chance that prompted me. Snatching up the crystal jug which contained the golden wine, I emptied it into a great golden vessel which stood half hidden beneath the fringe of a tapestry. I had drunk enough for the scent to be on my breath.

Then, as I heard footsteps and voices without, I extended myself quickly on a divan, the jug lying on its side near my outstretched hand. I heard the door open, and there was an instant's silence so intense as to be almost tangible. Then Yasmeena spat like an angry cat. "By the gods, he's emptied the jug! See how he lies in brutish slumber! Faugh! The noblest figure is abominable when besotted. Well, let us to our task. We need not fear to be overheard by him."

"Had I not better summon the guard and have him dragged to his cell?" came Gotrah's voice. "We cannot afford to take chances with this secret, which none has ever known except the Queen of Yugga and her major-domo."

I sensed that they came and stood over me, looking down. I moved vaguely and mumbled thickly, as if in drunken dreams.

Yasmeena laughed.

"No fear. He will know nothing before dawn. Yuthla could split and fall into Yogh without breaking his sottish dreams. The fool! This night he would have been lord of the world, for I would have made him lord of the Queen of the world—for one night. But the lion changes not his mane, nor the barbarian his brutishness."

"Why not put him to the torture?" grunted Gotrah.

"Because I want a man, not a broken travesty. Besides, his is a spirit not to be conquered by fire or steel. No. I am Yasmeena and I will make him love me before I feed him to the vultures. Have you placed the Kothan Altha among the Virgins of the Moon?"

"Aye, Queen of the dusky stars. A month and a half from this night she dances the dance of the Moon with the other wenches."

"Good. Keep them guarded day and night. If this tiger learns of our plans for his sweetheart, chains and bolts will not hold him."

"A hundred and fifty men guard the virgins," answered Gotrah. "Not even the Ironhand could prevail against them."

"It is well. Now to this other matter. Have you the parchment?"

"Aye."

"Then I will sign it. Give me the stylus."

I heard the crackle of papyrus and the scratch of a keen point, and then the Queen said:

"Take it now, and lay it on the altar in the usual place. As I promise in the writing, I will appear in the flesh tomorrow night to my faithful subjects and worshippers, the blue pigs of Akka. Ha! ha! ha! I never fail to be amused at the animal-like awe on their stupid countenances when I emerge from the shadows of the golden screen, and spread my arms above them in blessing. What fools they are, not in all these ages, to have discovered the secret door and the shaft that leads from their temple to this chamber."

"Not so strange," grunted Gotrah. "None but the priest ever comes into the temple except by special summons, and he is far too superstitious to go meddling be-

hind the screen. Anyway, there is no sign to mark the secret door from without."

"Very well," answered Yasmeena. "Go."

I HEARD Gotrah fumbling at something, then a slight grating sound. Consumed by curiosity, I dared open one eye a slit, in time to glimpse Gotrah disappearing through a black opening that gaped in the middle of the stone floor, and which closed after him. I quickly shut my eye again and lay still, listening to Yasmeena's quick pantherish tread back and forth across the floor.

Once she came and stood over me. I felt her burning gaze and heard her curse beneath her breath. Then she struck me viciously across the face with some kind of jeweled ornament that tore my skin and started a trickle of blood. But I lay without twitching a muscle, and presently she turned and left the chamber, muttering.

As the door closed behind her I rose quickly, scanning the floor for some sign of the opening through which Gotrah had gone. A furry rug had been drawn aside from the center of the floor, but in the polished black stone I searched in vain for a crevice to denote the hidden trap. I momentarily expected the return of Yasmeena, and my heart pounded within me. Suddenly, under my very hand, a section of the floor detached itself and began to move upward. A pantherish bound carried me behind a tapestried couch, where I crouched, watching the trap rise upward. The narrow head of Gotrah appeared, then his winged shoulders and body.

He climbed up into the chamber, and as he turned to lower the lifted trap, I left the floor with a cat-like leap that carried me over the couch and full on his shoulders.

He went down under my weight, and my gripping fingers crushed the yell in his throat. With a convulsive heave he twisted under me, and stark horror flooded his face as he glared up at me. He was down on the cushioned stone, pinned under my iron bulk. He clawed for the dagger at his girdle, but my knee pinned it down. And crouching on him, I glutted my mad hate for his cursed race. I strangled him slowly, gloatingly, avidly watching his features contort and his eyes glaze. He must have been dead for some minutes before I loosed my hold.

Rising, I gazed through the open trap. The light from the torches of the chamber shone down a narrow shaft, into which was cut a series of narrow steps, that evidently led down into the bowels of the rock Yuthla. From the conversation I had heard, it must lead to the temple of the Akkis, in the town below. Surely I would find Akka no harder to escape from than Yugga. Yet I hesitated, my heart torn at the thought of leaving Altha alone in Yugga. But there was no other way. I did not know in what part of that devilcity she was imprisoned, and I remembered what Gotrah had said of the great band of warriors guarding her and the other virgins.

Virgins of the Moon! Cold sweat broke out on me as the full significance of the phrase became apparent. Just what the festival of the Moon was I did not fully know, but I had heard hints and scattered comments among the Yaga women, and I knew it was a beastly saturnalia, in which the full frenzy of erotic ecstasy was reached in the dying gasps of the wretches sacrificed to the only god the winged people recognized—their own inhuman lust.

The thought of Altha being subjected to such a fate drove me into a berserk frenzy, and steeled my resolution. There was but one chance—to escape myself, and try to reach Koth and bring back enough men to attempt a rescue. My heart sank as I con-

templated the difficulties in the way, but there was nothing else to be done.

LIFTING Gotrah's limp body I dragged it out of the chamber through a door different from that through which Yasmeena had gone; and traversing a corridor without meeting anyone, I concealed the corpse behind some tapestries. I was certain that it would be found, but perhaps not until I had a good start. Perhaps its presence in another room than the chamber of the trap might divert suspicion from my actual means of escape, and lead Yasmeena to think that I was merely hiding somewhere in Yugga.

But I was crowding my luck. I could not long hope to avoid detection if I lingered. Returning to the chamber, I entered the shaft, lowering the trap above me. It was pitch-dark, then, but my groping fingers found the catch that worked the trap, and I felt that I could return if I found my way blocked below. Down those inky stairs I groped, with an uneasy feeling that I might fall into some pit or meet with some grisly denizen of the underworld. But nothing occurred, and at last the steps ceased and I groped my way along a short corridor that ended at a blank wall. My fingers encountered a metal catch, and I shot the bolt, feeling a section of the wall revolving under my hands. I was dazzled by a dim yet lurid light, and blinking, gazed out with some trepidation.

I was looking into a lofty chamber that was undoubtedly a shrine. My view was limited by a large screen of carved gold directly in front of me, the edges of which flamed dully in the weird light.

Gliding from the secret door, I peered around the screen. I saw a broad room, made with the same stern simplicity and awesome massiveness that characterized Almuric architecture. It was a temple, the first I had encountered on Almuric. The ceiling was lost in the brooding shadows; the walls were black, dully gleaming, and unadorned. The shrine was empty except for a block of ebon stone, evidently an altar, on which blazed the lurid flame I had noted, and which seemed to emanate from a great somber jewel set upon the altar. I noticed darkly stained channels on the sides of that altar, and on the dusky stone lay a roll of white parchment—Yasmeena's word to her worshippers. I had stumbled into the Akka holy of holies—uncovered the very root and base on which the whole structure of Akka theology was based: the supernatural appearances of revelations from the goddess, and the appearance of the goddess herself in the temple. Strange that a whole religion should be based on the ignorance of the devotees concerning a subterranean stair! Stranger still, to an Earthly mind, that only the lowest form of humanity on Almuric should possess a systematic and ritualistic religion, which Earth people regard as sure token of the highest races!

But the cult of the Akkas was dark and weird. The whole atmosphere of the shrine was one of mystery and brooding horror. I could imagine the awe of the blue worshippers to see the winged goddess emerging from behind the golden screen, like a deity incarnated from cosmic emptiness.

Closing the door behind me, I glided stealthily across the temple. Just within the door a stocky blue man in a fantastic robe lay snoring lustily on the naked stone. Presumably he had slept tranquilly through Gotrah's ghostly visit. I stepped over him as gingerly as a cat treading wet earth, Gotrah's dagger in my hand, but he did not awaken. An instant later I stood outside, breathing deep of the river-laden night air.

The temple lay in the shadow of the great cliffs. There was no moon, only the myriad millions of stars that glimmer in

the skies of Almuric. I saw no lights anywhere in the village, no movement. The sluggish Akkis slept soundly.

Stealthily as a phantom I stole through the narrow streets, hugging close to the sides of the squat stone huts. I saw no human until I reached the wall. The drawbridge that spanned the river was drawn up, and just within the gate sat a blue man, nodding over his spear. The senses of the Akkis were dull as those of any beasts of burden. I could have knifed the drowsy watchman where he sat, but I saw no need of useless murder. He did not hear me, though I passed within forty feet of him. Silently I glided over the wall, and silently I slipped into the water.

Striking out strongly, I forged across the easy current, and reached the farther bank. There I paused only long enough to drink deep of the cold river water; then I struck out across the shadowed desert at a swinging trot that eats up miles—the gait with which the Apaches of my native Southwest can wear out a horse.

In the darkness before dawn I came to the banks of the Purple River, skirting wide to avoid the watch-tower which jutted dimly against the star-flecked sky. As I crouched on the steep bank and gazed down into the rushing swirling current, my heart sank. I knew that, in my fatigued condition, it was madness to plunge into that maelstrom. The strongest swimmer that either Earth or Almuric ever bred had been helpless among those eddies and whirlpools. There was but one thing to be done—try to reach the Bridge of Rocks before dawn broke, and take the desperate chance of slipping across under the eyes of the watchers. That, too, was madness, but I had no choice.

But dawn began to whiten the desert before I was within a thousand yards of the Bridge. And looking at the tower, which seemed to swim slowly into clearer outline, etched against the dim sky, I saw a shape soar up from the turrets and wing its way toward me. I had been discovered. Instantly a desperate plan occurred to me. I began to stagger erratically, ran a few paces, and sank down in the sand near the river bank. I heard the beat of wings above me as the suspicious harpy circled; then I knew he was dropping earthward. He must have been on solitary sentry duty, and had come to investigate the matter of a lone wanderer, without waking his mates.

Watching through slitted lids, I saw him strike the earth near by, and walk about me suspiciously, simitar in hand. At last he pushed me with his foot, as if to find if I lived. Instantly my arm hooked about his legs, bringing him down on top of me. A single cry burst from his lips, half stifled as my fingers found his throat; then in a great heaving and fluttering of wings and lashing of limbs, I heaved him over and under me. His simitar was useless at such close quarters. I twisted his arm until his numbed fingers slipped from the hilt; then I choked him into submission. Before he regained his full faculties, I bound his wrists in front of him with his girdle, dragged him to his feet, and perched myself astride his back, my legs locked about his torso. My left arm was hooked about his neck, my right hand pricked his hide with Gotrah's dagger.

In a few low words I told him what he must do, if he wished to live. It was not the nature of a Yaga to sacrifice himself, even for the welfare of his race. Through the rose-pink glow of dawn we soared into the sky, swept over the rushing Purple River, and vanished from the sight of the land of Yagg, into the blue mazes of the northwest.

11

I DROVE that winged devil unmercifully. Not until sunset did I allow him to drop earthward. Then I bound his feet and wings so he could not escape, and

gathered fruit and nuts for our meal. I fed him as well as I fed myself. He needed strength for the flight. That night the beasts of prey roared perilously close to us, and my captive turned ashy with fright, for we had no way of making a protecting fire, but none attacked us. We had left the forest of the Purple River far, far behind, and were among the grasslands. I was taking the most direct route to Koth, led by the unerring instinct of the wild. I continually scanned the skies behind me for some sign of pursuit, but no winged shapes darkened the southern horizon.

IT WAS on the fourth day that I spied a dark moving mass in the plains below, which I believed was an army of men marching. I ordered the Yaga to fly over them. I knew that I had reached the vicinity of the wide territory dominated by the city of Koth, and there was a chance that these might be men of Koth. If so, they were in force, for as we approached I saw there were several thousand men, marching in some order.

So intense was my interest that it almost proved my undoing. During the day I left the Yaga's legs unbound, as he swore that he could not fly otherwise, but I kept his wrists bound. In my engrossment I did not notice him furtively gnawing at the thong. My dagger was in its sheath, since he had shown no recent sign of rebellion. My first intimation of revolt was when he wheeled suddenly sidewise, so that I lurched and almost lost my grip on him. His long arm curled about my torso and tore at my girdle, and the next instant my own dagger gleamed in his hand.

There ensued one of the most desperate struggles in which I have ever participated. My near fall had swung me around, so that instead of being on his back, I was in front of him, maintaining my position only by one hand clutching his hair, and one knee crooked about his leg. My other hand was locked on his dagger wrist, and there we tore and twisted, a thousand feet in the air, he to break away and let me fall to my death, or to drive home the dagger in my breast, I to maintain my grip and fend off the gleaming blade.

On the ground my superior weight and strength would quickly have settled the issue, but in the air he had the advantage. His free hand beat and tore at my face, while his unimprisoned knee drove viciously again and again for my groin. I hung grimly on, taking the punishment without flinching, seeing that our struggles were dragging us lower and lower toward the earth.

Realizing this, he made a final desperate effort. Shifting the dagger to his free hand, he stabbed furiously at my throat. At the same instant I gave his head a terrific downward wrench. The impetus of both our exertions whirled us down and over, and his stroke, thrown out of line by our erratic convulsion, missed its mark and sheathed the dagger in his own thigh. A terrible cry burst from his lips, his grasp went limp as he half fainted from the pain and shock, and we rushed plummet-like earthward. I strove to turn him beneath me, and even as I did, we struck the earth with a terrific concussion.

From that impact I reeled up dizzily. The Yaga did not move; his body had cushioned mine, and half the bones in his frame must have been splintered.

A clamor of voices rang on my ears, and turning, I saw a horde of hairy figures rushing toward me. I heard my own name bellowed by a thousand tongues. I had found the men of Koth.

A hairy giant was alternately pumping my hand and beating me on the back with blows that would have staggered a horse, while bellowing: "Ironhand! By Thak's jawbones, *Ironhand!* Grip my hand, old war-dog! Hell's thunders, I've known no

such joyful hour since the day I broke old Khush of Tanga's back!"

There was old Khossuth Skullsplitter, somber as ever, Thab the Swift, Gutchluk Tigerwrath—nearly all the mighty men of Koth. And the way they smote my back and roared their welcome warmed my heart as it was never warmed on Earth, for I knew there was no room for insincerity in their great simple hearts.

"Where have you been, Ironhand?" exclaimed Thab the Swift. "We found your broken carbine out on the plains, and a Yaga lying near it with his skull smashed; so we concluded that you had been done away with by those winged devils. But we never found your body—and now you come tumbling through the skies locked in combat with another flying fiend! Say, have you been to Yugga?" He laughed as a man laughs when he speaks a jest.

"Aye, to Yugga, on the rock Yuthla, by the river Yogh, in the land of Yagg," I answered. "Where is Zal the Thrower?"

"He guards the city with the thousand we left behind," answered Khossuth.

"His daughter languishes in the Black City," I said. "On the night of the full moon, Altha, Zal's daughter, dies with five hundred other girls of the Guras—unless we prevent it."

A MURMUR of wrath and horror swept along the ranks. I glanced over the savage array. There were a good four thousand of them; no bows were in evidence, but each man bore his carbine. That meant war, and their numbers proved it was no minor raid.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"The men of Khor move against us, five thousand strong," answered Khossuth. "It is the death grapple of the tribes. We march to meet them afar off from our walls, and spare our women the horrors of the war."

"Forget the men of Khor!" I cried passionately. "You would spare the feelings of your women—yet thousands of your women suffer the tortures of the damned on the ebon rock of Yuthla! Follow me! I will lead you to the stronghold of the devils who have harried Almuric for a thousand ages!"

"How many warriors?" asked Khossuth uncertainly.

"Twenty thousand."

A groan rose from the listeners.

"What could our handful do against that horde?"

"I'll show you!" I exclaimed. "I'll lead you into the heart of their citadel!"

"Hai!" roared Ghor the Bear, brandishing his broadsword, always quick to take fire from my suggestions. "That's the word! Come on, sir brothers! Follow Ironhand! He'll show us the way!"

"But what of the men of Khor?" expostulated Khossuth. "They are marching to attack us. We must meet them."

Ghor grunted explosively as the truth of this assertion came home to him, and all eyes turned toward me.

"Leave them to me," I proposed desperately. "Let me talk with them———"

"They'll hack off your head before you can open your mouth," grunted Khossuth.

"That's right," admitted Ghor. "We've been fighting the men of Khor for fifty thousand years. Don't trust them, comrade."

"I'll take the chance," I answered.

"The chance you shall have, then," said Gutchluk grimly. "For there they come!" In the distance we saw a dark moving mass.

"Carbines ready!" barked old Khossuth, his cold eyes gleaming. "Loosen your blades, and follow me."

"Will you join battle tonight?" I asked.

He glanced at the sun. "No. We'll march to meet them, and pitch camp just out of gunshot. Then with dawn we'll rush them and cut their throats."

"They'll have the same idea," explained Thab. "Oh, it will be great fun!"

"And while you revel in senseless bloodshed," I answered bitterly, "your daughters and theirs will be screaming vainly under the tortures of the winged people over the river Yogh. Fools! Oh, you fools!"

"But what can we do?" expostulated Gutchluk.

"Follow me!" I yelled passionately. "We'll march to meet them, and I'll go on to them alone."

I wheeled and strode across the plain, and the hairy men of Koth fell in behind me, with many head-shakes and mutterings. I saw the oncoming mass, first as a mingled blur; then the details stood out —hairy bodies, fierce faces, gleaming weapons—but I swung on heedlessly. I knew neither fear nor caution; my whole being seemed on fire with the urgency of my need and desire.

Several hundred yards separated the two hosts when I dashed down my single weapon—the Yaga dagger—and shaking off Ghor's protesting hands, advanced alone and unarmed, my hands in the air, palms toward the enemy.

These had halted, drawn up ready for action. The unusualness of my actions and appearance puzzled them. I momentarily expected the crack of a carbine, but nothing happened until I was within a few yards of the foremost group, the mightiest men clustered about a tall figure that was their chief—old Bragi, Khossuth had told me. I had heard of him, a hard, cruel man, moody and fanatical in his hatreds.

"Stand!" he shouted, lifting his sword. "What trick is this? Who are you who comes with empty hands in the teeth of war?"

"I am Esau Ironhand, of the tribe of Koth," I answered. "I would parley with you."

"What madman is this?" growled Bragi. "Than—a bullet through the head."

But the man called Than, who had been staring eagerly at me, gave a shout instead and threw down his carbine.

"Not if I live!" he exclaimed, advancing toward me his arms outstretched. "By Thak, it is he! Do you not remember me, Than Swordswinger, whose life you saved in the Hills?"

He lifted his chin to display a great scar on his corded neck.

"You are he who fought the sabertooth! I had not dreamed you survived those awful wounds."

"We men of Khor are hard to kill!" he laughed joyously, throwing his arms about me in a bear-like embrace. "What are you doing among the dogs of Koth? You should be fighting with us!"

"If I have my way there will be no fighting," I answered. "I wish only to talk with your chiefs and warriors. There is nothing out of the way about that."

"True!" agreed Than Swordswinger "Bragi, you will not refuse him this?"

Bragi growled in his beard, glaring at me.

"Let your warriors advance to that spot." I indicated the place I meant. "Khossuth's men will come up on the other side. There both hordes will listen to what I have to say. Then, if no agreement can be reached, each side shall withdraw five hundred yards and after that follow its own initiative."

"You are mad!" Old Bragi jerked his beard with a shaking hand of rage. "It is treachery. Back to your kennel, dog!"

"I am your hostage," I answered. "I am unarmed. I will not move out of your sword reach. If there is treachery, strike me down on the spot."

"But why?"

"I have been captive among the Yagas!" I exclaimed. "I have come to tell the Guras what things occur in the land of Yagg!"

"The Yagas took my daughter!" ex-

claimed a warrior, pushing through the ranks. "Did you see her in Yagg?"

"They took my sister"—"And my young bride"—"And my niece!" shouts rose in chorus, as men swarmed about me, forgetful of their enemies, shaking me in the intensity of their feeling.

"Back, you fools!" roared Bragi, smiting with the flat of his sword. "Will you break your ranks and let the Kothans cut you down? Do you not see it is a trick?"

"It is no trick!" I cried. "Only listen to me, in God's name!"

They swept away Bragi's protests. There was a milling and stamping, during which only a kindly Providence kept the nerve-taut Kothans from pouring a volley into the surging mass of their enemies, and presently a sort of order was evolved. A shouted conference finally resulted in approximately the position I had asked for—a semicircle of Khorans over against a similar formation composed of Kothans. The close proximity almost caused the tribal wrath to boil over. Jaws jutted, eyes blazed, hairy hands clutched convulsively at carbine stocks. Like wild dogs those wild men glared at each other, and I hastened to begin my say.

I WAS never much of a talker, and as I strode between those hostile hordes I felt my fire die out in cold ague of helplessness. A million ages of traditional war and feud rose up to confound me. One man against the accumulated ideas, inhibitions, and customs of a whole world, built up through countless millenniums—the thought crushed and paralyzed me. Then blind rage swept me at the memory of the horrors of Yugga, and the fire blazed up again and enveloped the world and made it small, and on the wings of that conflagration I was borne to heights of which I had never dreamed.

No need for fiery oratory to tell the tale I had to tell. I told it in the plainest, bluntest language possible, and the knowledge and feeling that lay behind the telling made those naked words pulse, and burn like acid.

I told of the hell that was Yugga. I told of young girls dying beneath the excesses of black demons—of women lashed to gory ribbons, mangled on the wheel, sundered on the rack, flayed alive, dismembered alive—of the torments that left the body unharmed, but sucked the mind empty of reason and left the victim a blind, mowing imbecile. I told them—oh God, I cannot repeat all I told them, at the memory of which I am even now sickened almost unto death.

Before I had finished, men were bellowing and beating their breasts with their clenched fists, and weeping in agony of grief and fury.

I lashed them with a last whip of scorpions. "These are your women, your own flesh and blood, who scream on the racks of Yugga! You call yourselves men—you strut and boast and swagger, while these winged devils mock you. Men! Ha!" I laughed as a wolf barks, from the depths of my bitter rage and agony. "Men! Go home and don the skirts of women!"

A terrible yell arose. Clenched fists were brandished, bloodshot eyes flamed at me, hairy throats bayed their anguished fury. "You lie, you dog! Damn you, you lie! We *are* men! Lead us against these devils or we will rend you!"

"If you follow me," I yelled, "few of you will return. You will suffer and you will die in hordes. But if you had seen what I have seen, you would not wish to live. Soon approaches the time when the Yagas will clean their house. They are weary of their slaves. They will destroy those they have, and fare forth into the world for more. I have told you of the destruction of Thugra. So it will be with Khor; so it will be with Koth—when winged devils swoop out of the night.

Follow me to Yugga—I will show you the way. If you are men, follow me!"

Blood burst from my lips in the intensity of my appeal, and as I reeled back, in a state of complete collapse from overwrought nerves and strain, Ghor caught me in his mighty arms.

Khossuth rose like a gaunt ghost. His ghostly voice soared out across the tumult.

"I will follow Esau Ironhand to Yugga, if the men of Khor will agree to a truce until our return. What is your answer, Bragi?"

"No!" roared Bragi. "There can be no peace between Khor and Koth. The women in Yugga are lost. Who can war against demons? Up, men, back to your place! No man can twist me with mad words to forget old hates."

He lifted his sword, and Than Swordswinger, tears of grief and fury running down his face, jerked out his poniard and drove it to the hilt in the heart of his king. Wheeling to the bewildered horde, brandishing the bloody dagger, his body shaken with sobs of frenzy, he yelled:

"So die all who would make us traitors to our own women! Draw your swords, all men of Khor who will follow me to Yugga!"

Five thousand swords flamed in the sun, and a deep-throated thunderous roar shook the very sky. Then wheeling to me, his eyes coals of madness:

"Lead us to Yugga, Esau Ironhand!" cried Than Swordswinger. "Lead us to Yagg, or lead us to Hell! We will stain the waters of Yogh with blood, and the Yagas will speak of us with shudders for ten thousand times a thousand years!"

Again the clangor of swords and the roar of frenzied men maddened the sky.

12

RUNNERS were sent to the cities, to give word of what went forward. Southward we marched, four thousand men of Koth, five thousand of Khor. We moved in separate columns, for I deemed it wise to keep the tribes apart until the sight of their oppressors should again drown tribal feelings.

Our pace was much swifter than that of an equal body of Earth soldiers. We had no supply trains. We lived off the land through which we passed. Each man bore his own armament—carbine, sword, dagger, canteen, and ammunition pouch. But I chafed at every mile. Sailing through the air on the back of a captive Yaga had spoiled me for marching. It took us days to cover ground the flying men had passed over in hours. Yet we progressed, and some three weeks from the time we began the march, we entered the forest beyond which lay the Purple River and the desert that borders the land of Yagg.

We had seen no Yagas, but we went cautiously now. Leaving the bulk of our force encamped deep in the forest, I went forward with thirty men, timing our march so that we reached the bank of the Purple River a short time after midnight, just before the setting of the moon. My purpose was to find a way to prevent the tower guard from carrying the news of our coming to Yugga, so that we might cross the desert without being attacked in the open, where the numbers and tactics of the Yagas would weigh most heavily against us.

Khossuth suggested that we lie in wait among the trees along the bank, and pick the watchers off at long range at dawn, but this I knew to be impossible. There was no cover along the water's edge, and the river lay between. The men in the tower were out of our range. We might creep near enough to pick off one or two, but it was imperative that all should perish, since the escape of one would be enough to ruin our plans.

So we stole through the woods until we reached a point a mile upstream, opposite

a jutting tongue of rock, toward which, I believed, a current set in from the center of the stream. There we placed in the water a heavy, strong catamaran we had constructed, with a long powerful rope. I got upon the craft with four of the best marksmen of the combined horde—Thab the Swift, Skel the Hawk, and two warriors of Khor. Each of us bore two carbines, strapped to our backs.

We bent to work with crude oars, though our efforts seemed ludicrously futile in the teeth of that flood. But the raft was long enough and heavy enough not to be spun by every whirlpool we crossed, and by dint of herculean effort we worked out toward the middle of the stream. The men on shore paid out the rope, and it acted as a sort of brace, swinging us around in a wide arc that would have eventually brought us back to the bank we had left, had not the current we hoped for suddenly caught us and hurled us at dizzy speed toward the projecting tongue of rock. The raft reeled and pitched, driving its nose under repeatedly, until sometimes we were fully submerged. But our ammunition was waterproof, and we had lashed ourselves to the logs; so we hung on like drowned rats, until our craft was dashed against the rocky point.

It hung there for a breathless instant, in which time it was touch and go. We slashed ourselves loose, jumped into the water which swirled arm-pit deep about us, and fought our way along the point, clinging tooth and nail to every niche or projection, while the foaming current threatened momentarily to tear us away and send us after our raft which had slid off the ledge and was dancing away down the river.

We did make it, though, and hauled ourselves up on the shore at last, half dead from buffeting and exhaustion. But we could not stop to rest, for the most delicate part of our scheme was before us. It was necessary that we should not be discovered before dawn gave us light enough to see the sights of our carbines, for the best marksman in the world is erratic by starlight. But I trusted to the chance that the Yagas would be watching the river, and paying scant heed to the desert behind them.

So in the darkness that precedes dawn, we stole around in a wide half-circle, and the first hint of light found us lying in a depression we had scraped in the sand not over four hundred yards to the south of the tower.

It was tense waiting, while the dawn lifted slowly over the land, and objects became more and more distinct. The roar of the water over the Bridge of Rocks reached us plainly, and at last we were aware of another sound. The clash of steel reached us faintly through the watery tumult. Ghor and others were advancing to the river bank, according to my instructions. We could not see any Yagas on the tower; only hints of movement along the turrets. But suddenly one whirled up into the morning sky and started south at headlong speed. Skel's carbine cracked and the winged man, with a loud cry, pitched sideways and tumbled to earth.

There followed an instant of silence; then five winged shapes darted into the air, soaring high. The Yagas sensed what was occurring, and were chancing all on a desperate rush, hoping that at least one might get through. We all fired, but I scored a complete miss, and Thab only slightly wounded his man. But the others brought down the the man I had missed, while Thab's second shot dropped the wounded Yaga. We reloaded hastily, but no more came from the tower. Six men watched there, Yasmeena had said. She had spoken the truth.

We cast the bodies into the river. I crossed the Bridge of Rocks, leaping from boulder to boulder, and told Ghor

to take his men back into the forest, and to bring up the host. They were to camp just within the fringe of woods, out of sight from the sky. I did not intend to start across the desert until nightfall.

Then I returned to the tower and attempted to gain entrance, but found no doors, only a few small barred windows. The Yagas had entered it from the top. It was too tall and smooth to be climbed, so we did the only thing left to do. We dug pits in the sand and covered them with branches, over which we scattered dust. In these pits we concealed our best marksmen, who lay all day, patiently scanning the sky. Only one Yaga came winging across the desert. No human was in sight, and he was not suspicious until he poised directly over the tower. Then, when he saw no watchmen, he became alarmed, but before he could race away, the reports of half a dozen carbines brought him tumbling to the earth in a whirl of limbs and wings.

As the sun sank, we brought the warriors across the Bridge of Rocks, an accomplishment which required some time. But at last they all stood on the Yaga side of the river, and with our canteens well filled, we started at quick pace across the narrow desert. Before dawn we were within striking distance of the river.

Having crossed the desert under cover of darkness, I was not surprised that we were able to approach the river without being discovered. If any had been watching from the citadel, alert for anything suspicious, they would have discerned our dark mass moving across the sands under the dim starlight. But I knew that in Yugga no such watch was ever kept, secure as the winged people felt in the protection of the Purple River, of the watchmen in the tower, and of the fact that for centuries no Gura raid had dared the bloody doom of former invaders. Nights were spent in frenzied debauchery, followed by sodden sleep. As for the men of Akka, those slow-witted drudges were too habitually drowsy to constitute much menace against our approach, though I knew that once roused they would fight like animals.

So three hundred yards from the river we halted, and eight thousand men under Khossuth took cover in the irrigation ditches that traversed the fields of fruit. The waving fronds of the squat trees likewise aided in their concealment. This was done in almost complete silence. Far above us towered the somber rock Yuthla. A faint breeze sprang up, forerunner of dawn. I led the remaining thousand warriors toward the river bank. Halting them a short distance from it, I wriggled forward on my belly until my hands were at the water's edge. I thanked the Fates that had given me such men to lead. Where civilized men would have floundered and blundered; the Guras moved as easily and noiselessly as stalking panthers.

Across from me rose the wall, sheer from the steep bank, that guarded Akka. It would be hard to climb in the teeth of spears. At the first crack of dawn, the bridge, which towered gauntly against the stars, would be lowered so that Akkis might go into the fields to work. But before then the rising light would betray our forces.

With a word to Ghor, who lay at my side, I slid into the water and struck out for the farther shore, he following. Reaching a point directly below the bridge, we hung in the water, clutching the slippery wall, and looked about for some way of climbing it. There the water, near the bank, was almost as deep as in midstream. At last Ghor found a crevice in the masonry, wide enough to give him a grip for his hands. Then bracing himself, he held fast while I clambered on his shoulders. Standing thus I managed to reach the lower part of the lifted bridge, and an instant later I drew myself up. The

erected bridge closed the gap in the wall. I had to clamber over the barrier. One leg was across, when a figure sprang out of the shadows, yelling a warning. The watchman had not been as drowsy as I had expected.

He leaped at me, the starlight glinting on his spear. With a desperate twist of my body I avoided the whistling blade, though the effort almost toppled me from the wall. My outthrown hand gripped his lank hair as he fell against the coping with the fury of his wasted thrust, and jerking myself back into balance, I dealt him a crushing buffet on the ear with my clenched fist. He crumpled, and the next instant I was over the wall.

Ghor was bellowing like a bull in the river, mad to know what was taking place above him, and in the dim light the Akkis were swarming like bees out of their stony hives. Leaning over the barrier I stretched Ghor the shaft of the watchman's spear, and he came heaving and scrambling up beside me. The Akkis had stared stupidly for an instant; then realizing they were being invaded, they rushed, howling madly.

As Ghor sprang to meet them, I leaped to the great windlass that controlled the bridge. I heard the Bear's thunderous war-cry boom above the squalling of the Akkis, the strident clash of steel and the crunch of splintered bone. But I had no time to look; it was taking all my strength to work the windlass. I had seen five Akkis toiling together at it; yet in the stress of the moment I accomplished its lowering single-handed, though sweat burst out on my forehead and my muscles trembled with the effort. But down it came, and the farther end touched the other bank in time to accommodate the feet of the warriors who sprang up and rushed for it.

I wheeled to aid Ghor, whose panting gasps I still heard amidst the clamor of the mêlée. I knew the din in the lower town would soon rouse the Yagas and it was imperative that we gain a foothold in Akka before the shafts of the winged men began to rain among us.

GHOR was hard pressed when I turned from the bridgehead. Half a dozen corpses lay under his feet, and he wielded his great sword with a berserk lustiness that sheared through flesh and bone like butter, but he was streaming blood, and the Akkis were closing in on him.

I had no weapon but Gotrah's dagger, but I sprang into the fray and ripped a sword from the sinking hand of one whose heart my slim blade found. It was a crude weapon, such as the Akkis forge, but it had edge and weight, and swinging it like a club, I wrought havoc among the swarming blue men. Ghor greeted my arrival with a gasping roar of pleasure, and redoubled the fury of his tremendous strokes, so that the dazed Akkis momentarily gave back.

And in that fleeting interval, the first of the Guras swarmed across the bridge. In an instant fifty men had joined us. But there the matter was deadlocked. Swarm after swarm of blue men rushed from their huts to fall on us with reckless fury. One Gura was a match for three or four Akkis, but they swamped us by numbers. They crushed us back into the bridge mouth, and strive as we could, we could not advance enough to clear the way for the hundreds of warriors behind us who yelled and struggled to come to sword-strokes with the enemy. The Akkis pressed in on us in a great crescent, almost crushing us against the men behind us. They lined the walls, yelling and screaming and brandishing their weapons. There were no bows or missiles among them; their winged masters were careful to keep such things out of their hands.

In the midst of the carnage dawn broke, and the struggling hordes saw their ene-

mies. Above us, I knew, the Yagas would be stirring. Indeed I thought I could already hear the thrash of wings above the roar of battle, but I could not look up. Breast to breast we were locked with the heaving, grunting hordes, so closely there was no room for sword-strokes. Their teeth and filthy nails tore at us beast-like; their repulsive body odor was in our nostrils. In the crush we writhed and cursed, each man striving to free a hand to strike.

My flesh crawled in dread of the arrows I knew must soon be raining from above, and even with the thought the first volley came like a whistling sheet of sleet. At my side and behind me men cried out, clutching at the feathered ends protruding from their bodies. But then the men on the bridge and on the farther bank, who had held their fire for fear of hitting their comrades in the uncertain light, began loosing their carbines at the Akkis. At that range their fire was devastating. The first volley cleared the wall, and climbing on the bridge rails the carbineers poured a withering fusillade over our heads into the close-massed horde that barred our way. The result was appalling. Great gaps were torn in the struggling mob, and the whole horde staggered and tore apart. Unsupported by the mass behind, the front ranks caved in, and over their mangled bodies we rushed into the narrow streets of Akka.

Opposition was not at an end. The stocky blue men still fought back. Up and down the streets sounded the clash of steel, crack of shots, and yells of pain and fury. But our greatest peril was from above.

The winged men were swarming out of their citadel like hornets out of a nest. Several hundred of them dropped swiftly down into Akka, swords in their hands, while others lined the rim of the cliff and poured down showers of arrows. Now the warriors hidden in the shrub-masked ditches opened fire, and as that volley thundered, a rain of mangled forms fell on the flat roofs of Akka. The survivors wheeled and raced back to cover as swiftly as their wings could carry them.

But they were more deadly in defense than in attack. From every casement, tower and battlement above they rained their arrows; a hail of death showered Akka, striking down foe and serf alike. Guras and Akkis took refuge in the stone-roofed huts, where the battling continued in the low-ceilinged chambers until the gutters of Akka ran red. Four thousand Guras battled four times their number of Akkis, but the size, ferocity and superior weapons of the apemen balanced the advantage of numbers.

Across the river Khossuth's carbineers kept up an incessant fire at the towers of Yugga, but with scant avail. The Yagas kept well covered, and their arrows, arching down from the sky, had a greater range and accuracy than the carbines of the Guras. But for their position among the ditches, Khossuth's men would have been wiped out in short order, and as it was, they suffered terribly. They could not join us in Akka; it would have been madness to try to cross the bridge in the teeth of that fire.

Meanwhile, I ran straight for the temple of Yasmeena, cutting down those who stood in my way. I had discarded the clumsy Akka sword for a fine blade dropped by a slain Gura, and with this in my hand I cut my way through a swarm of blue spearmen who made a determined stand before the temple. With me were Ghor, Thab the Swift, Than Swordswinger and a hundred other picked warriors.

AS THE last of our foes were trampled under foot, I sprang up the black stone steps to the massive door, where the bizarre figure of the Akka priest barred my way with shield and spear. I parried his spear and feinted a thrust at his thigh. He lowered the great gold-scrolled shield, and before he could lift it again I slashed off

his head, which rolled grinning down the steps. I caught up the shield as I rushed into the temple.

I rushed across the temple and tore aside the golden screen. My men crowded in behind me, panting, blood-stained, their fierce faces lighted by the weird flame from the altar jewel. Fumbling in my haste, I found and worked the secret catch. The door began to give, reluctantly. It was this reluctance which fired my brain with sudden suspicion, as I remembered how easily it had opened before. Even with the thought I yelled, "Back!" and hurled myself backward as the door gaped suddenly.

Instantly my ears were deafened by an awful roar, my eyes blinded by a terrible flash. Something like a spurt of hell's fire passed so close by me it seared my hair in passing. Only my recoil, which carried me behind the opening door, saved me from the torrent of liquid fire which flooded the temple from the secret shaft.

There was a blind chaotic instant of frenzy, shot through with awful screams. Then through the din I heard Ghor bellowing my name, and saw him stumbling blindly through the whirling smoke, his beard and bristling hair burned crisp. As the lurid murk cleared somewhat, I saw the remnants of my band—Ghor, Thab and a few others who by quickness or luck had escaped. Than Swordswinger had been directly behind me, and was knocked out of harm's way when I leaped back. But on the blackened floor of the temple lay three-score shriveled forms, burned and charred out of all human recognition. They had been directly in the path of that devouring sheet of flame as it rushed to dissipate itself in the outer air.

The shaft seemed empty now. Fool to think that Yasmeena would leave it unguarded, when she must have suspected that I escaped by that route. On the edges of the door and the jamb I found bits of stuff like wax. Some mysterious element had been sealed into the shaft which the opening of the door ignited, sending it toward the outer air in a rush of flame.

I knew the upper trap would be made fast. I shouted for Thab to find and light a torch, and for Ghor to procure a heavy beam for a ram. Then, telling Than to gather all the men he could find in the streets and follow, I raced up the stair in the blackness. As I thought, I found the upper trap fastened—bolted above, I suspected; and listening closely, I caught a confused mumbling above my head, and knew the chamber must be filled with Yagas.

An erratic flame bobbing below me drew my attention, and quickly Thab reached my side with a torch. He was followed by Ghor and a score of others, grunting under the weight of a heavy log-like beam, torn from some Akka hut. He reported that fighting was still going on in the streets and buildings, but that most of the Akka males had been put to the sword, and others, with their women and children, had leaped into the river and swum for the south shore. He said some five hundred swordsmen were thronging the temple.

"Then burst this trap above our heads," I exclaimed, "and follow me through. We must win our way into the heart of the hold, before the arrows of the Yagas on the towers overwhelm Khossuth."

It was difficult in that narrow shaft, where only one man could stand on each step, but gripping the heavy beam like a ram, we swung it and dashed it against the trap. The thunder of the blows filled the shaft deafeningly, the jarring impact stung our hands and quivered the wood, but the trap held. Again—and again—panting, grunting, thews cracking, we swung the beam—and with a final terrific drive of hard-braced knotty legs and iron shoulders, the trap gave with a splintering crash, and light flooded the shaft from above.

WITH a wordless yell I heaved up through the splinters of the trap, the gold shield held above my head. A score of swords descended on it, staggering me; but desperately keeping my feet, I heaved up through a veritable rain of shattering blades, and burst into the chamber of Yasmeena. With a yell the Yagas swarmed on me, and I cast the bent and shattered shield in their faces, and swung my sword in a wheel that flashed through breasts and throats like a mowing blade through corn. I should have died there, but from the opening behind me crashed a dozen carbines, and the winged men went down in heaps.

Then up into the chamber came Ghor the Bear, bellowing and terrible, and after him the killers of Khor and of Koth, thirsting for blood.

That chamber was full of Yagas, and so were the adjoining rooms and corridors. But in a compact circle, back to back, we held the shaft entrance, while scores of warriors swarmed up the stair to join us, widening and pushing out the rim of the circle. In that comparatively small chamber the din was deafening and terrifying—the clang of swords, the yelling, the butcher's sound of flesh and bones parting beneath the chopping edge.

We quickly cleared the chamber, and held the doors against attack. As more and more men came up from below, we advanced into the adjoining rooms, and after perhaps a half-hour of desperate fighting, we held a circle of chambers and corridors, like a wheel of which the chamber of the shaft was the axle, and more and more Yagas were leaving the turrets to take part in the hand-to-hand fighting. There were some three thousand of us in the upper chambers now, and no more came up the shaft. I sent Thab to tell Khossuth to bring his men across the river.

I believed that most of the Yagas had left the turrets. They were massed thick in the chambers and corridors ahead of us, and were fighting like demons. I have mentioned that their courage was not of the type of the Guras', but any race will fight when a foe has invaded its last stronghold, and these winged devils were no weaklings.

For a time the battle was at a gasping deadlock. We could advance no farther in any direction, nor could they thrust us back. The doorways through which we slashed and thrust were heaped high with bodies, both hairy and black. Our ammunition was exhausted, and the Yagas could use their bows to no advantage. It was hand to hand and sword to sword, men stumbling among the dead to come to hand grips.

Then, just when it seemed that flesh and blood could stand no more, a thunderous roar rose to the vaulted ceilings, and up through the shaft and out through the chambers poured streams of fresh, eager warriors to take our places. Old Khossuth and his men, maddened to frenzy by the arrows that had been showering upon them as they lay partly hidden in the ditches, foamed like rabid dogs to come to hand-grips and glut their fury. Thab was not with them, and Khossuth said he had been struck down by an arrow in his leg, as he was following his king across the bridge in that dash from the ditches to the temple. There had been few losses in that reckless rush, however; as I had suspected, most of the Yagas had entered the chambers, leaving only a few archers on the towers.

Now began the most bloody and desperate mêlée I have ever witnessed. Under the impact of the fresh forces, the weary Yagas gave way, and the battle streamed out through the halls and rooms. The chiefs tried in vain to keep the maddened Guras together. Struggling groups split off the main body, men ran singly down twisting

corridors. Throughout all the citadel thundered the rush of trampling feet, shouts, and din of steel.

Few shots were fired, few arrows winged. It was hand to hand with a vengeance. In the roofed chambers and halls, the Yagas could not spread their wings and dart down on their foes from above. They were forced to stand on their feet, meeting their ancient enemies on even terms. It was out on the rooftops and the open courts that our losses were greatest, for in the open the winged men could resort to their accustomed tactics.

But we avoided such places as much as possible, and man to man, the Guras were invincible. Oh, they died by scores, but under their lashing swords the Yagas died by hundreds. A thousand ages of cruelty and oppression were being repaid, and red was the payment. The sword was blind; Yaga women as well as men fell beneath it. But knowing the fiendishness of those sleek black females, I could not pity them.

I was looking for Altha.

SLAVES there were, thousands of them, dazed by the battle, cowering in terror, too bewildered to realize its portent, or to recognize their rescuers. Yet several times I saw a woman cry out in sudden joy and run forward to throw her arms about the bull-neck of some hairy, panting swordsman, as she recognized a brother, husband, or father. In the midst of agony and travail there was joy and reuniting, and it warmed my heart to see it. Only the little yellow slaves and the red women crouched in terror, as fearful of these roaring hairy giants as of their winged masters.

Hacking and slashing my way through the knots of struggling warriors, I sought for the chamber where were imprisoned the virgins of the Moon. At last I caught the shoulder of a Gura girl, cowering on the floor to avoid chance blows of the men battling above her, and shouted a question in her ear. She understood and pointed, unable to make herself heard above the din. Catching her up under one arm, I slashed a path for us, and in a chamber beyond I set her down, and she ran swiftly down a corridor, crying for me to follow. I raced after her, down that corridor, up a winding stair, across a roof-garden where Guras and Yagas fought, and finally she halted in an open court. It was the highest point of the city, besides the minarets. In the midst rose the dome of the Moon, and at the foot of the dome she showed me a chamber. The door was locked, but I shattered it with blows of my sword, and glared in. In the semi-darkness I saw the gleam of white limbs huddled close together against the opposite wall. As my eyes became accustomed to the dimness I saw that some hundred and fifty girls were cowering in terror against the wall. And as I called Altha's name, I heard a voice cry, "Esau! Oh, *Esau!*" and a slim white figure hurled itself across the chamber to throw white arms about my neck and rain passionate kisses on my bronzed features. For an instant I crushed her close, returning her kisses with hungry lips; then the roar of battle outside roused me. Turning I saw a swarm of Yagas, pressed close by five hundred swords, being forced out of a great doorway near by. Abandoning the fray suddenly they took to flight, their assailants flowing out into the court with yells of triumph.

And then before me I heard a light mocking laugh, and saw the lithe figure of Yasmeena, Queen of Yagg.

"So you have returned, Ironhand?" Her voice was like poisoned honey. "You have returned with your slayers to break the reign of the gods? Yet you have not conquered, oh fool."

Without a word I drove at her, silently and murderously, but she sprang lightly into the air, avoiding my thrust. Her laughter rose to an insane scream.

"Fool!" she shrieked. "You have not conquered! Did I not say I would perish in the ruins of my kingdom? Dogs, you are all dead men!"

Whirling in midair she rushed with appalling speed straight for the dome. The Yagas seemed to sense her intention, for they cried out in horror and protest, but she did not pause. Lighting on the smooth slope of the dome, keeping her perch by the use of her wings, she turned, shook a hand at us in mockery, and then, gripping some bolt or handle set in the dome, braced both her feet against the ivory slope and pulled with all her strength.

A section of the dome gave way, catapulting her into the air. The next instant a huge misshapen bulk came rushing from the opening. And as it rushed, the impact of its body against the edges of the door was like the crash of a thunderbolt. The dome split in a hundred places from base to pinnacle, and fell in with a thunderous roar. Through a cloud of dust and debris and falling stone the huge figure burst into the open. A yell went up from the watchers.

The thing that had emerged from the dome was bigger than an elephant, and in shape something like a gigantic slug, except that it had a fringe of tentacles all about its body. And from these writhing tentacles crackled sparks and flashes of blue flame. It spread its writhing arms, and at their touch stone walls crashed to ruin and masonry burst apart. It was brainless, sightless—elemental force incorporated in the lowest form of animation—power gone mad and run amuck in a senseless fury of destruction.

There was neither plan nor direction to its plunges. It rushed erratically, literally plowing through solid walls which buckled and gave way, falling on it in showers which did not seem to injure it. On all sides men fled aghast.

"Get back through the shaft, all who can!" I yelled. "Take the girls—get them out first!" I was dragging the dazed creatures from the prison chamber and thrusting them into the arms of the nearest warriors, who carried them away. On all sides of us the towers and minarets were crumbling and roaring down in ruin.

"Make ropes of the tapestries," I yelled. "Slide down the cliff! In God's name, hasten! This fiend will destroy the whole city before it is done!"

"I've found a bunch of rope ladders," shouted a warrior. "They'll reach to the water's edge, but——"

"Then fasten them and send the women down them," I shrieked. "Better take the chance of the river, then—here, Ghor, take Altha!"

I threw her into the arms of the blood-stained giant, and rushed toward the mountain of destruction which was crashing through the walls of Yugga.

OF THAT cataclysmic frenzy I have only a confused memory, an impression of crashing walls, howling humans, and that engine of doom roaring through all, with a ghastly aurora playing about it, as the electric power in its awful body blasted its way through solid stone.

How many Yagas, warriors and women slaves died in the falling castles is not to be known. Some hundreds had escaped down the shaft when falling roofs and walls blocked that way, crushing scores who were trying to reach it. Our warriors worked frenziedly, and the silken ladders were strung down the cliffs, some over the town of Akka, some, in haste, over the river, and down these the warriors carried the slave-girls—Guras, red and yellow girls alike.

After I had seen Ghor carry Altha away I wheeled and ran straight toward that electric horror. It was not intelligent, and what I expected to accomplish I do not know. But through the reeling walls and

among the rocking towers that spilled down showers of stone blocks I raced, until I stood before the rearing horror. Blind and brainless though it was, yet it possessed some form of sensibility, because instantly, as I hurled a heavy stone at it, its movements ceased to be erratic. It charged straight for me, casting splinted masonry right and left, as foam is thrown by the rush of an ox through a stream.

I ran fleetly from it, leading it away from the screaming masses of humanity that struggled and fled along the rim of the cliff, and suddenly found myself on a battlement on the edge of the cliff, with a sheer drop of five hundred feet beneath me to the river Yogh. Behind me came the monster. As I turned desperately, it reared up and plunged at me. In the middle of its gigantic slug-like body I saw a dark spot as big as my hand pulsing. I knew that this must be the center of the being's life, and I sprang at it like a wounded tiger, plunging my sword into that dark spot.

Whether I reached it or not, I did not know. Even as I leaped, the whole universe exploded in one burst of blinding white flame and thunder, followed instantly by the blackness of oblivion.

They say that at the instant my sword sank into the body of the fire-monster, both it and I were enveloped in a blinding blue flame. There was a deafening report, like a thunder-clap, that tore the creature asunder, and hurled its mangled form, with my body, far out over the cliff, to fall five hundred feet into the deep blue waters of Yogh.

It was Thab who saved me from drowning, leaping into the river despite his crippled condition, to dive until he found and dragged my senseless body from the water.

You will say, perhaps, that it is impossible for a man to fall five hundred feet into water and live. My only reply is that I did it, and I live; though I doubt if there is any man on Earth who could do it.

For a long time I was senseless, and for longer I lay in delirium; for longer again, I lay completely paralyzed, my disrupted and numbed nerves slowly coming back into life again.

I came to myself on a couch in Koth. I knew nothing of the long trek back through the forests and across the plains from the doomed city of Yugga. Of the nine thousand men who marched to Yagg, only five thousand returned, wounded, weary, blood-stained, but triumphant. With them came fifty thousand women, the freed slaves of the vanquished Yagas. Those who were neither Kothan nor Khoran were escorted to their own cities—a thing unique in the history of Almuric. The little yellow and red women were given the freedom of either city, and allowed to dwell there in full freedom.

As for me, I have Altha—and she has me. The glamor of her, akin to glory, dazzled me with its brilliance, when first I saw her bending over my couch after my return from Yagg. Her features seemed to glimmer and float above me; then they coalesced into a vision of transcendent loveliness, yet strangely familiar to me. Our love will last forever, for it has been annealed in the white-hot fires of a mutual experience—of a savage ordeal and a great suffering.

Now, for the first time, there is peace between the cities of Khor and Koth, which have sworn eternal friendship to each other; and the only warfare is the unremitting struggle waged against the ferocious wild beasts and weird forms of animal life that abounds in much of the planet. And we two—I an Earthman born, and Altha, a daughter of Almuric who possesses the gentler instincts of an Earthwoman—we hope to instill some of the culture of my native planet into this erstwhile savage people before we die and become as the dust of my adopted planet, Almuric.

"The shovel had just touched wood when another owl-hoot convulsed the darkness."

The Laugh

By RICHARD H. HART

That ghastly cacchination told the diamond-thief that his quest was fruitless—a graveyard tale

IT WAS well past eleven when Stan Wimberley cranked the dilapidated truck into life and sprang quickly to the cab, to adjust spark and gasoline levers before the wheezy motor should die. It would never do for his means of conveyance to fail him now. On this night he was going to reclaim the fortune which, he

told himself for the ten-thousandth time, was rightfully his.

For John Griffin was dead. Dead and buried. And Wimberley was as sure as anyone can be that Griffin had taken the Slidell diamond to the grave with him; the Slidell diamond that was as much Wimberley's as Griffin's.

It was curious about that diamond. Only Wimberley knew that Griffin had it. The latter had made a practise of carrying it in a chamois bag, greasy with age, about his neck. He had coated it with sealing-wax, and frequently displayed it, telling everyone that it was a pebble from a sacred mountain which his grandmother had given him. He wore it night and day, he said, to protect him from evil, and he often reiterated the statement that it must be buried with him. Otherwise, he said, bad luck would dog the footsteps of the person thwarting his desire.

People considered him a little touched—on that point, at least—which was just what Griffin desired. No one had ever made the slightest attempt to filch away the "holy relic."

No one, that is except Wimberley—and Griffin was always watching *him*. A thousand times Wimberley had pleaded with Griffin to sell the diamond and divide the proceeds. Griffin had always countered that this was "not safe, yet." Then he would add: "In a couple of years, maybe. It'll keep."

Oh, yes, it would keep. It had kept for twelve years when Griffin died, a dozen years to the day after Old Man Slidell had been killed in the wreck of his automobile. Wimberley and Griffin had been together when they stumbled upon the wreck. It was Wimberley who noticed that the four-carat diamond was in its accustomed place on the dead man's shirt-front, but it was Griffin who reached forth his hand and took it.

"No use for the heirs to fight over this," he'd said with a sly grin. "They'll have enough without it—and we know a couple of fellows it would do more good—hey, Wimberley?"

Wimberley's throat had constricted so he couldn't speak, but he had managed a nod and a grimace, unaware that the greed in his eyes had already answered for him.

Griffin had dropped the gem into his pocket and the two rascals had hurriedly gone away, leaving the wreck to be discovered by others.

It had happened that the next comers were a numerous party, with substantial men among them, so that no one was accused, or even suspected, of having taken the diamond. It was supposed that the stone had been lost at the time of the wreck, or that Old Man Slidell had previously hidden it so carefully that it could not be found.

WITHIN less than a week after their illegal acquisition, Wimberley was suggesting to Griffin that they turn the diamond into money and divide the proceeds.

"It'll be safe enough," he argued. "Why, nobody's even looking for the thing. We can go down to New Orleans and get a good price for it there—not what it's worth, of course, but something near it; enough to put us both on Easy Street, with good liquor and good-looking frails a-plenty, and no work or worry."

"Put us in the hoosegow, you mean—you sap," Griffin had retorted. "You poor boob, don't you know that every stone as big as this one has a history, and that anyone with enough money to buy it would recognize it? Wait until this business cools off!"

That sort of logic had sufficed for a couple of months, for Wimberley was not an utter fool. Then, to his dismay, he found his confederate's attitude changing. Griffin no longer bothered to be logical. He held the whip-hand now, and knew it.

It was too late for Wimberley to accuse him of the theft, and the former's only chance of profiting by their joint crime lay in securing Griffin's acquiescence to selling the diamond.

There were times when Wimberley thought that Griffin derived a malicious pleasure from tantalizing him; at others, he was quite sure that Griffin had fallen in love with the bauble, or with the power and potential affluence which it embodied, and that he had no intention of letting go of it.

What made the situation so galling was that Griffin was in comfortable circumstances, never having to worry about his living, whereas Wimberley had to toil for his daily bread and never had two good suits of clothes at the same time in his life.

And all along Griffin displayed a diabolical cleverness. Beyond his refusal to set a date for disposing of the stone, he had never crossed Wimberley. He never snubbed him, publicly or otherwise, and at least once a week he invited him to dinner. After the meal was over and the two men were alone, he would become loquacious.

"You're a good fellow, Wimberley," he would say smilingly, "but you're lacking in patience—in *finesse*. You want to rush things too much. People like you are their own worst enemies."

Wimberley would realize savagely that his guns had been spiked before he could unlimber them; his half-hearted attempts to convince Griffin that they ought to sell the diamond were foredoomed to fail, and before he knew it the conversation would have drifted to other topics. He had at last become almost resigned to this will-o'-the-wispish sort of warfare in which he never won and Griffin never lost.

Then, after the affair had been dragging on so long that neither man could say how many years it had been without counting back, Wimberley was called out of town by the last illness of a relative. The relative had left him nothing, and Wimberley had returned after two weeks to find Griffin also dead and in his grave.

Nothing was being said about the diamond (or "sacred pebble"), and Wimberley was too craven-clever to make inquiries about it; he'd never been one to awaken sleeping dogs. For the same reason, he decided against visiting the cemetery; there was no use in anything which might be inconveniently remembered later if something happened to go wrong.

It was necessary, of course, to act quickly. Griffin had been buried but one day, no rain had since fallen, and the earth of his grave was still fresh—but it would not be fresh next week. Any attempt to disturb it then would be noticed, an investigation might be made, inquiries begun. No; it would be folly to wait. So Wimberley had decided that he would act that very night.

All of these things passed through his mind again as his ancient little truck chugged and wheezed the three miles to the cemetery where he knew Griffin had been buried. But such things belonged to the past, now, he told himself exultantly. When he'd got his hands on the Slidell diamond he'd leave at once for New Orleans. Then: money, liquor, women, power. Ah-h-h! He was glad now that Griffin had insisted on waiting. Now it was *all* his!

THE young moon had set an hour earlier, but Wimberley switched off the primitive magneto-lights a half-mile before he reached the graveyard. With a fortune at stake, there was no excuse for taking chances, especially since he knew every rut in the road. He could almost have driven it blindfolded. An owl hooted somewhere as he turned into the gateless entrance, and Wimberley snickered.

" 'Who' is right!" he muttered. "Even if they found the grave had been opened, they'd never know *who* had done it. That's

something nobody'll ever know but Uncle Stanley!"

After a few minutes of patient searching, he located the grave. His nostrils had helped to find the fresh-turned earth. A tiny flashlamp, carefully masked, enabled him to read the mortician's tag and establish the identification beyond question.

Quickly, silently, he took a long-handled shovel from the truck and fell to work. The mound had been sodded, and this pleased him. When the grave had been refilled and the turf redisposed, little chance of detection would remain. But he could not bring himself to relish the enterprise, and he speeded up his labors in order to finish it as soon as possible.

The shovel had just touched wood when another owl-hoot convulsed the darkness. Even though he recognized it almost at once, Wimberley could not prevent the tool's slipping from his perspiring fingers, and he was uncomfortably aware of the pit of his stomach.

A sudden loathing for his task gripped him for a moment, but the thought of the Slidell diamond nerved him to resume. That was something worth fighting for—against man, ghost, or Father of Evil in person! Again he plied the shovel, but with more speed and less caution than before. Telltale clods were being scattered about the grave, but Wimberley was powerless to slow his pace; he was afraid that if he didn't finish the task soon he would find himself leaping into his truck and driving away at top speed.

There was no reason for this mad haste, he told himself, but panic seldom yields to reason, and the shovel flew faster and faster. The top of the coffin-box was clear at last, and Wimberley used the shovel as a crowbar to pry off its boards. He was making a steadily increasing amount of noise, but caution was a thing of the past. What he had to do must be done, and the sooner it was done the better!

It was a titan's task to lift the coffin from box and grave, but Wimberley accomplished it at the cost of barked knuckles and wrenched muscles. He'd be full of aches and pains tomorrow, he reflected as he balanced the casket upon the fresh mound of soil, but there would be compensations. Yes, there'd be compensations!

His momentary pause allowed the silence to close in about him again, and he realized suddenly that he was alone in the graveyard and that the hour was midnight. With a shudder he drew a screwdriver from his pocket and ran exploring fingers along the coffin.

What was that?

Wimberley tried to grin in the darkness. He'd almost have sworn he heard a laugh, somewhere beyond his truck. Not a very noisy laugh, but almost as if someone were smiling out loud, he thought. For a moment he imagined he could see a pair of eyes glittering at him with demoniac mirth.

He strained his vision against the darkness and finally became convinced that there was nothing to see. As for the laugh, that had probably been a sound from his cooling motor, distorted by his nervousness. He shrugged his shoulders, but the shrug became a shudder, and his fingers trembled as he essayed to remove the first screw from its varnished bed.

After a false start or two, he managed to get the screw out; then he began to search for the second one. At this rate, he reflected angrily, he wouldn't get the lid off for an hour. And an hour spent in these surroundings was an unconscionable period. Perhaps it would be better——

There it was again!

This time the shock was greater, because his nerves were already on edge. The screwdriver slipped from his fingers, and as he crouched down to retrieve it he tried to convince himself that it was really cooling metal which he had heard. But the reassuring belief would not crystallize; there

was an uneasy residuum of doubt that refused to be gone. If a cooling motor usually made such a peculiarly derisive noise, he should have noticed it before. Frantic searching of his memory brought forth no such comforting recollection.

THERE were other things, of course, which could have produced strange noises: animals and growing shrubs, for instance. But the effort to reconcile the hideous sound with these sources was futile—and there was no use in trying to fool himself so. It was possible, though, that he had only imagined it. Overstrained nerves do strange things, sometimes.

"Just my imagination, of course," he said determinedly to himself as he applied his recovered screwdriver again to its task. "If I think I hear it again, I'll just put it down to nerves and go ahead as if nothing had——"

"Heh, heh; heh-heh."

Phantom hair erected itself along Wimberley's spine and a spasmodic shudder flung the screwdriver from his hand into the darkness. That was exactly how John Griffin had always laughed!

Against his will, against every atom of mental force that he could still command, the thought that Griffin was deriding him hammered upon Wimberley's brain and clamored for acceptance.

"No! No!" he protested desperately. "If I believe *that* I'll have gone mad! I must stay sane. I must be rational. I must find a logical explanation for that —that——"

Suddenly the explanation came. He'd heard a laugh, true. But it wasn't Griffin's laugh. Some living person was in the graveyard, spying on him; spying on him and unable wholly to refrain from laughter at his pitiful efforts at secrecy!

Maddening as the explanation was, it was preferable to the alternative, and Wimberley hugged it to himself avidly. Damn spying fools and all their kindred!

He was only trying to reclaim what was rightfully his, and some cheeky busybody was eavesdropping on him—getting ready to spoil everything. It wasn't right!

But—and the thought revived him—probably the spy hadn't yet identified him; there might still be time to escape with a whole skin. Yes, and with the Slidell diamond, too!

For this he could thank those who had located the cemetery upon a hillside. And he could credit his own account for having stopped his truck just below the grave. It was no trick at all to slide the coffin from its resting-place upon the mound of earth into the truck-bed. Only a moment longer was needed to leap into the cab and release the brake. At once gravity seized upon the laden vehicle and propelled it toward the entranceway with momentarily increasing speed. It was barely outside when Wimberley threw it into high gear and switched on the ignition. Still lightless, the truck hurtled forward into the night.

A dozen times in the next quarter-hour Wimberley escaped death by less than the breadth of a hair. Familiar as the road was, only his frenzied alertness saved him from a smash-up. Once it was the dark loom of poplars against the scarcely less dark vault above that kept him from careening into a hillside. At another spot a whiff of damp air from a brook prevented his running headlong into a ditch.

When he could stand the strain no longer, he switched on the headlights, then tramped upon the accelerator. The indicator of the speedometer spun crazily, then inched steadily forward. Thirty-five, forty, forty-five, fifty miles per hour it showed as the old high-pressure tires bounced from rut to rut and threatened to leave their rims with every bounce. Fence-posts and telegraph poles merged into an almost solid wall. The badly-clogged radiator began to steam. A smell of scorched paint came

up from the floor-boards, and through a crack between them the exhaust-pipe glowed redly.

WIMBERLEY had put a score of miles behind him when a sudden clangorous bedlam from the motor told him that its bearings had been pushed beyond their limit, and that the wild ride was over. With the last of its momentum, he allowed the truck to find a resting-place behind a clump of bushes that would partly screen it from the road.

Upon the return of silence there came a recrudescence of the old unease. To fight it off, Wimberley fell to work on the coffin again. He used the flashlamp, this time, regardless of the need for secrecy. His nerves, he was now willing to admit, were not equal to completing the task in the dark. Hard enough to do it with the little lamp! Only the thought of the Slidell diamond kept him at it.

When the lid of the coffin came off, Wimberley found his gaze drawn irresistibly to the face of the corpse. Decomposition had not yet set in, but the corners of his lips were drawn upward, as if in a faintly derisive grin. And, although the lids were down, the dim light produced the illusion of a mocking stare. Wimberley gritted his teeth and probed for the chamois bag. Yes, here it was, greasier and shabbier than ever, but promisingly heavy.

The cord which secured it was a stout one, and when the eager Wimberley pulled at it he found the corpse rising to follow in menacing fashion. Horror lent him strength for a convulsive jerk that broke the cord and sent him tumbling backward to the ground. He bounded up again, ready to flee, but Griffin's corpse had settled back into the coffin, out of sight.

For several minutes Wimberley stood stock-still, breathing heavily, eyes riveted on the casket. Had anything appeared above its edge, he would have shrieked and fled headlong. But nothing appeared.

Finally he was able to remember the bag in his hand. Now, now he was going to see the Slidell diamond again—after all these years. And it was all his!

The thought galvanized him into action. Stooping over, he set the flashlamp upon the running-board of the truck; then he shook out the contents of the chamois bag. The familiar dull-red hue of sealing-wax met his feverish gaze. At last!

He laid the cherished object upon the running-board and rapped it sharply with the handle of his penknife. The shell of sealing-wax cracked and fell apart, revealing the stone within.

It was a very ordinary-looking pebble.

Even as one part of Wimberley's brain was numbed by the shock, another portion was incandescent with understanding. That operation of Griffin's! The unprofessional-seeming surgeon from New Orleans. The speedy recovery. The strange, the incomprehensible, reluctance of Griffin to discuss the operation. All of it was clear as crystal in one devastating moment.

It was a joke on Wimberley. It was a huge joke, a cataclysmic joke. It was such a joke as Death himself must laugh at. And the cream of the jest was that it had been perpetrated so long ago. Ten years it had been since Griffin had called in the big-city fence to play the part of a surgeon, and to dicker for the Slidell diamond behind the smoke-screen of a mythical operation. For ten long years, for a decade of fearful hope and bitter despair on the part of Wimberley, Griffin had kept the secret and held his laughter. But now that the climax was reached even rigor mortis could not restrain his mirth!

From within the coffin came a soft murmur of sound. It could have been the corpse settling further into its satin bed, but Wimberley was certain that John Griffin was indulging in a last, derisive chuckle.

"He was kneeling on the floor and praying."

The Totem-Pole

By ROBERT BLOCH

A frightful horror was consummated in the Indian wing of the museum—a compelling tale of a weird revenge

ARTHUR SHURM belonged to the vast army of the unidentified—that mighty swarm of nonentities which includes street-car conductors, restaurant counter-men, elevator operators, bellboys, theatre ushers, and other public servants wearing uniforms of their professions. One never seems to notice their faces; their garb is a designation of official capacity, and the body within makes no impression on the memory.

Arthur Shurm was one of those men.

To be exact, he was a museum attendant, and surely there is no employment which makes a person less conspicuous. One might perchance take notice of a counterman's voice when he bellows "Two sunny side up and cuppa cawfee;" it is possible to observe the demeanor of a bellboy as he lingers for a tip; one can perhaps mark the particularly erect subservience of an individual usher as he leads his party down the aisle. But a museum attendant never speaks, it seems. There is nothing about his carriage or manner to impress a visitor. Then too, his personality is totally overshadowed by the background in which he moves—the vast palace of death and decay which is a museum. Of all the unidentified army, the museum attendant is beyond doubt the most self-effacing.

And yet the fact remains that I shall never forget Arthur Shurm. I wish to heaven I could.

1

I WAS standing in the tavern at the bar. Never mind what I was doing there—let's say I was looking for local color. The truth is, I was waiting for a girl and had been stood up. It happens to everybody. At any rate, I was standing there when Arthur Shurm rushed in. I stared at him.

It was the natural thing to do. A museum attendant is a museum attendant, after all. He is a little man in a blue uniform—a quite nondescript blue uniform, lacking the gaudiness of a policeman's outfit, or the dignified buttons that adorn a fireman. A museum attendant wears his inconspicuous garb, standing stolidly in the shadows before mummy-cases or geological specimens. He may be old or young; one simply never notices him. He always moves slowly, quietly, with an air of abstract deliberation which seems part and parcel of the museum's background, its total disregard of Time.

So it was natural for me to turn and stare at Arthur Shurm when he ran into the tavern. I had never seen such movement before.

There were other arresting things, however, which emphasized his entrance. The way his pale face twitched, for example; the roll of his bloodshot eyes—these were phenomena impossible to overlook. And his hoarse voice, gasping for a drink, quite electrified me.

The bartender, urbane as all such servitors of Bacchus, never flickered an eyelash as he poured the whisky. Arthur Shurm gulped down his drink, and the look in his eyes made it unnecessary for him to ask for a second one. It was poured, and as quickly downed. Then Arthur Shurm put his head down on the bar and began to cry. The bartender blandly turned away. Nothing surprises a tavern-keeper. But I was the only other customer, and I edged down the rail and braced the weeping museum attendant on the shoulder.

"Come on, now," I said, signaling the acolyte of Silenus to refill our glasses. "What's up, man?"

Arthur Shurm gazed at me through tears, not of sorrow, but of agonized remembrance. I felt that gaze, pouring from bloodshot eyes that had seen too much. I knew that the man could never contain such memories within himself alone. The story was coming. And when Shurm had drunk the third drink, it came.

"Thanks. Thanks, I needed that. Guess I'm pretty upset. Sorry."

I smiled reassuringly at his incoherency. He braced himself.

"Look here, Mister. Let me talk to you. Got to talk to someone. Then I'll go out and find a cop."

"Any trouble?"

"Yes—no—not what you think. It isn't the *right* kind of trouble. See what I mean? I have to talk to someone first. Then I'll get a cop."

I had the glasses refilled and led Shurm to a booth where the bartender could not overhear. Shurm sat there and trembled until I grew impatient.

"Now then," I said, briskly. The firmness in my voice was just what he had been looking for. He needed such reassurance of strength. He was almost eager to talk.

"I'll tell it to you straight. Straight, like it was a story, or something. Then you can judge making heads or tails out of it all. I'll tell it to you from the beginning and leave it up to you, Mister."

Lord, he *was* frightened!

"My name's Arthur Shurm. I'm caretaker over at the Public Museum up the street. You know it. Been there six years and never had any trouble. Ask anybody once if I ever had trouble. I'm not crazy, Mister. They thought I was this week, but I'm not. After tonight I can prove I'm O.K.—but something else is crazy. That's what gets me. Something else is crazy, and that nearly drives me nuts."

I waited. Shurm rattled on.

"Like I say, here it is from the beginning. I been six years on the second floor —American Indian ethnology. Room 12. It was fine until last week. That's when they brought in the totem-pole. *The totem-pole!*"

He had no reason to scream, and I told him so.

"Sorry. I have to tell you about the pole, though. Shoshoonack Indian totem-pole, from Alaska. Doctor Bailey brought it back last week. He was up there on an expedition some place in the mountains, where these Shoshoonack Indians live. They're a new tribe, or something; don't know much about them. So Doctor Bailey he went up there with Doctor Fiske to get a few things for the museum. And last week Doctor Bailey came back home with the totem-pole. Doctor Fiske died up there. He died there, don't you see?"

I DIDN'T see, but I ordered another drink.

"That totem-pole he brought back—he had it set up in the American Indian room right away. It was a new pole, carved especially for him by the medicine men of the tribe. About ten feet tall it was, with faces all over it—you know how they look. Horrible thing.

"But Bailey was proud of it. He was proud of all he had done up there in the Shoshoonack country, bringing back a mess of pottery and picture-writings and stuff that was new to the curators and the big professors. He had them all in to look at it, and I guess he wrote up an article on the customs of the Shoshoonacks for some official report. Bailey is that kind of a man, very proud; I always hated him. Fat, greasy fellow, used to bawl me out for not dusting around proper. Crazy about his work, though.

"Anyhow, Bailey was awfully set up over his discoveries, and he didn't even seem to be sorry about Doctor Fiske dying there in Alaska. Seems Fiske had some kind of fever, and just kicked off in a few days. Bailey never even talked about it, but I know for a fact that Fiske did most of the work. You see, he was the one who found out about the Shoshoonack Indians in the first place, and he ran the expedition. Bailey had just come along, and now he strutted around claiming all the credit. He used to bring in visitors to see that ugly totem-pole and tell how it was made specially for him by the grateful Indians and presented to him just before he left for home. Oh, he was cocky enough!

"I'll never forget the day we first put in the totem-pole and I got a good look at the thing. I'm used enough to outlandish stuff on the job, Mister, but one look at this totem-pole was enough. It gave me the creeps.

"You've seen them? Well, never one like this. You know what they mean—

symbols of the tribe, sort of a coat-of-arms; made up of faces of bear-gods and beavers and owl-spirits, one on top of the other? This totem-pole was different. It was just faces; six human faces one on top of the other, with arms sticking out at the sides. And those faces were awful. Big staring red eyes, and grinning yellow teeth like fangs; all snarling brown faces leering out in a row so that they seemed to be looking right at you all the time. When the shadows hit the pole about midafternoon you could still see the eyes sort of glowing in the dark. Gave me a fright that first time, I tell you.

"But Doctor Bailey came in, fat and snappy in a new suit, and he brought a raft of professors and big shots, and they stood around examining the pole while Bailey jabbered like a monkey who just found a new coconut. He dragged out a magnifying-glass and puttered with it, trying to identify the wood and the kind of paint used, and bragging how the medicine man, Shawgi, had it done as a special going-away present and made the men of the tribe work night and day to get it done.

"I hung around and listened. Things were kinda quiet anyway. Bailey was telling about the way they carved the thing in the medicine man's big hut working only at night, with seven fires set around the place so no one could get in. They burned herbs in the fires to call down the spirits, and all the time they worked the men in the hut prayed out loud in long chants. Bailey claimed that the totem-poles were the most sacred things the Shoshoonacks had; they thought the spirits of their dead chiefs went into the poles, and every time a chief died a pole was made to set up in front of his family's hut. Shawgi, the medicine man, was supposed to summon the dead chief's spirit to inhabit the pole, and this called for a lot of chants and prayers.

"Oh, it was interesting stuff. Bailey laid it on and everybody was impressed. But none of them could figure out just how the pole had been put together, whether it was one piece of wood or a whole lot of pieces. They didn't find out what kind of wood it was, either, or the nature of the paint used to ornament those ugly-looking heads. One of the professors asked Bailey just what the faces on this pole meant, and Bailey admitted he didn't know—it was just a special job made by the medicine man to give to him as a farewell gift before he left. But all this set me figuring, and after the crowd went away, I had another look at the pole. I had a good look, too, because of something I noticed."

He paused. "This may sound long and silly to you now, Mister, but I got good reason to tell you all this. I want to explain what I noticed about them faces. They weren't *artificial* enough. Do you know what I mean? Usually Indian carving is kinda stiff and square-cut. But these faces were done real carefully, and they were all different, just like they were sculptures of human heads. And the arms were carved out perfectly, with hands on the ends. That just don't seem natural. I didn't like it when I found this out—more so because it was getting dark already and those eyes gleamed at me there, just as though these were real heads that could see me. It was a queer thing to think, but that's the way I felt.

"And the next day I thought so more. I walked through the room all day and couldn't help taking a look every time I passed the totem-pole. Seemed to me that the faces were getting *clearer*—I could recognize each one of the bottom four now, just like the faces of people I knew. The top ones were a little high up to see closely, and I didn't bother about those two. But the bottom four looked like human faces, now—evil, creepy faces. They grinned so, showing their teeth, and when

I walked away I got the feeling that their red eyes were following me, just like people stare at your back.

"After about two days I got used to that, but then last Friday night I worked late cleaning, just as I did tonight. And last Friday night I *heard*.

"IT WAS about nine o'clock and I was all alone in the building—all alone except for Bailey. He stays in his office generally to do work late. But I was the only one in the place; for sure the only one on the second floor. I was cleaning Room 11—the one just before the American Indian room, you know — when I heard voices.

"No, I wasn't puzzled, like a guy in a book. I didn't think of anything else, couldn't. Right away I thought *those Indians on the totem-pole were talking.*

"Low, mumbling voices. Talking in whispers almost, or voices from very far away. Talking in gibberish I couldn't understand—Indian talk. I edged near the door, and I swear I don't know whether I meant to sneak in on them or run away. But I heard the voices just whisper alone in the dark room; not one, or two, or three voices, but all of them. Indian talk. And then a high voice—a different voice. It came so quick I didn't catch all, but I heard the word. 'Bailey,' it said, at the end. Then I thought I was crazy, and on top of that I was scared stiff. I ran down the hall and downstairs to the office and dragged Bailey back with me. Made him come quietly, without telling him a thing. We got to Room 11 and I just held him there while the droning talk went on.

"He was pale as a sheet. I snapped the lights on and we went in. Bailey kept staring at the totem-pole. It was all right, of course, and there weren't any noises coming from it now. But it was all wrong in another way. Those faces were too easy for me to recognize now—those Indian faces. They stared at me and they stared at Bailey, and every second they seemed to snarl more and more. I couldn't keep looking at them, so I watched Bailey.

"Ever see a frightened fat man? Bailey was almost fainting. He kept looking and looking, and then his eyes seemed to go all black in the pupils and he began to mumble to himself. He did a funny thing. He looked at the bottom of the pole and then he pulled his head up real slowly, from one jerk to another. I knew he was watching each face in turn. And he mumbled.

" 'Kowi, Umsa, Wipi, Sigatch, Molkwi,' he said. He said it three times, so I remember. He said it in five separate words, like he was calling off names. Then he began shaking and groaning. 'It's them,' he said. 'It's them all right. All five of them. But who's on top? All five of them that went over the cliff. But how could Shawgi know that? And what did he mean to do, giving me this? It's mad—but there they are. Kowi, Umsa, Wipi, Sigatch, Molkwi and—good God!'

"He ran out of the room like doom was at his heels. I turned out the lights quick and followed. I didn't wait around to see if the whispering started again, either, and I had enough of looking at those faces. I went out and had a few stiff drinks that night, I can tell you. Oh—thanks, Mister. Thanks a lot. I can use this one with what I still got to tell you. I'll make it short, too. We have to get a cop.

"Well, Monday, Bailey got me before I went on duty. He looked plenty pale around the gills, and I could see he hadn't slept any better than I did. 'I think it's better if we forget about last Friday night, Shurm,' he said. 'Both of us were a little upset.'

"I wasn't that easy. 'What do you think is wrong, Doctor?' I asked him.

"He knew enough not to stall. 'I don't know,' he said. 'All I can say is that the faces on that totem-pole are those of In-

dians I knew up in the Shoshoonack country—Indians that died in an accident, going over a cliff in a dog-sled.' He looked sick when he said this. 'But don't say anything to anyone, Shurm. I give you my word I'm going to investigate this fully,' he says, 'and when I get the facts I'll let you know.'

"With that he slipped me five dollars.

"So I worked along, but I wasn't happy. I didn't go into that room any more than I had to on Monday or Tuesday, and still I just couldn't get ideas out of my head. Queer ideas. Ideas about how the medicine man, Shawgi, used to call souls to put in the totem-poles he made. Ideas of how Doctor Bailey might be lying some way about this accident he claimed the Indians were killed in. Ideas of how Shawgi gave the totem-pole to Bailey knowing it would haunt him. Ideas like that, and always the pictures of those terrible grinning faces and the little thin whispering in the dark.

"Wednesday I noticed Bailey go into the room. It was raining out, and the place was just about empty, and Bailey went into the room. He didn't know I'd seen him go in, and I was just curious enough to follow him, and mighty curious to stick behind a case and listen when I saw he was kneeling on the floor in front of the totem-pole and praying.

" 'Save me,' he mumbles. 'Spare me. I didn't know. I didn't mean to do it. I killed you—I cut the thongs on the harness and when the sled rounded the bend it went over. That I did. But you were present when I did—the other—I couldn't spare you as witnesses. I couldn't.'

"He sounded crazy, but I was guessing what he meant. He had killed those Indians, as I suspected, to hush them up about something else. And so Shawgi had fixed up the totem-pole to haunt him with it.

"Then Bailey began talking real low, and I heard him say something about Doctor Fiske and the way he had died; how Shawgi had been Fiske's friend, and how Fiske and Bailey had quarreled. The truth came to me then. I knew that Bailey had killed Fiske, instead of Fiske dying of fever like he was supposed to. Probably they had gone on a trip after specimens with the Indians. Bailey had killed Fiske to steal his trophies and the credit of the expedition. The Indians had found out about it. So Bailey had tampered with the sled and sent the Indians over the cliff on the way back. Shawgi made the totem of their faces and gave it to Bailey to drive him crazy.

"WELL, it looked as though he was succeeding. Bailey whimpered like a dog, crawling on the floor in front of those six grinning faces in the gloom, and it made me really sick to see it. I was going crazy too, hearing voices and looking at smiles from wooden faces. I got out without going back to that room.

"Thursday was my day off, and it pleased me. Today I went back. First one I saw was Bailey. He looked almost as though he was dying. 'What's the dope, Doctor?' I said.

"He just shook his head. Then he whispered. 'There were voices again last night, Shurm. And I could understand them.' I looked to see if he was kidding, but no. He bent down close. 'Voices came to me in the night. I wasn't here. I was home. But they came. They can come anywhere. I hear them now. They called me to the museum. They wanted me to come very much last night. All of them did—the *other*, too. I nearly went. Tell me, Shurm —for the mercy of God—did you hear voices too?'

"I shook my head.

" 'I'm going to take that totem-pole down as soon as I can,' he went on. 'I'm going to take it down and have it burned. I will get permission today from the Chief.

He must let me. If not you and I shall have to tell him what we know. I'm relying on you. We must beat that devil Shawgi—he hated me, I know—that's why he did this—beating his drums and calling up devils with his magic while he carved the faces to hide the souls that wait——'

"Then someone came by, and Bailey went off.

"That afternoon I couldn't help myself—I went in and looked at the totem-pole once again. Funny the way I trembled when I passed the door; it was getting me, too. Now that I had guessed about the murdered Indians I could see that the faces were taken from real life. I looked at them all—even the top one. The sixth one I still couldn't recognize—it might be the face of the medicine-man, Shawgi, himself. But it was the worst of all the smiling wicked faces with white teeth through which they whispered at night. At night!

"Tonight I was going to have to stay and look over the place; clean up. I didn't want to. I had too much to think about. Would I have to hear voices again? And downstairs working would be Doctor Bailey—the man I suspected of six murders. Yet I couldn't do a thing. No one would believe me, and I had no proof of either voices or Bailey being guilty. I worried, and all the time it got darker and darker, and the museum closed, and I began to go over the second floor room by room. Bailey was down in the office, working.

"About an hour and a half ago I was in Room 10. I heard the voices two rooms away. They were loud tonight; loud as if they were calling. I could hear grunting Indian sounds. And then I heard the high voice calling.

" 'Bailey! Bailey! Come here, Bailey! I'm waiting, Bailey—I'm waiting!'

"I was scared sick when Bailey came, a minute later. He walked slow as if he didn't see me, and his eyes were all black pupil. In his hand he had a match-box, and under his arm was a jug of kerosene. I knew what he was going to do.

"The voices were grumbling louder, but I had to follow. I didn't dare use any lights. Bailey went in ahead of me, and then I heard that laughing.

"It was the laughing that made me stop. I can't tell you about it, except that it was horrible—a chuckling laugh that went right through me. And someone—some*thing*—said 'Hello, Bailey.' Then I knew I was crazy, because I recognized the voice. For a minute I was stunned. Then I ran into the room.

"Just as I got near the doorway the screaming started. Bailey was screaming, and it mixed in with the awful laughing, and I heard a scrabbling sound and a crash as the kerosene jug fell. I pulled out my flashlight and I saw it. Lord!

"I didn't wait. I ran out. I came here. I want a cop. I haven't gone back yet. I want you to get the cop with me and come back. I want you should believe me and see what I saw. Oh——"

2

WE GOT the cop, Shurm and I, and we went back. I wish I could skip this part. We went back and took the elevator to the second floor, and Shurm nearly fainted before we dragged him out. We got his keys and made him light the place up—I'd give a million if we hadn't insisted on that. Then we marched down the hall and into Room 11. At the door Shurm had another hysterical outburst, but we dragged him on in.

At first neither the cop nor I saw it. Shurm had us by the arms, screaming away.

"Before you look I want to tell you something. Remember when I said I recognized the voice that called Bailey's name? The voice belonged to the sixth head—the

one I couldn't see so well—the one Bailey was afraid of. You know whose head it was, don't you?"

I guessed.

"It was Doctor Fiske's head," Shurm moaned. "Shawgi was his friend, and when Bailey double-crossed and killed him, Shawgi included him with the Indians in the revenge. Shawgi put Fiske's face on top of the totem-pole—he put Fiske's soul there just as he did with the five dead Indians. Fiske called Bailey tonight!"

We pulled Shurm forward as we rounded the cases. And then we stood before the totem-pole.

It was not easy to see the wooden pillar because there was a man standing against it—quite close against it, as though his arms were around it. A second glance, however, revealed the truth. *Its arms were around him!*

The wooden arms of the totem-pole had closed about Bailey's body in a tight embrace. They had seized him as he stooped to fire the pole, and now they crushed him close—crushed him close against the five writhing heads, close against the pointed wooden teeth of the five mouths. And one mouth had his legs, another his thighs, a third his belly, a fourth his chest, a fifth his throat. The five pairs of mouths had bitten deep, and there was blood on wooden lips.

Bailey was staring upward with what was left of his face. It was simply a torn red mask that gazed into another mask—the sixth and uppermost face of the totem-pole. The sixth face, as Shurm had said, was undoubtedly the face of a white man; the face of Doctor Fiske. And on the bloody lips rested not a smile, but a sardonic grin.

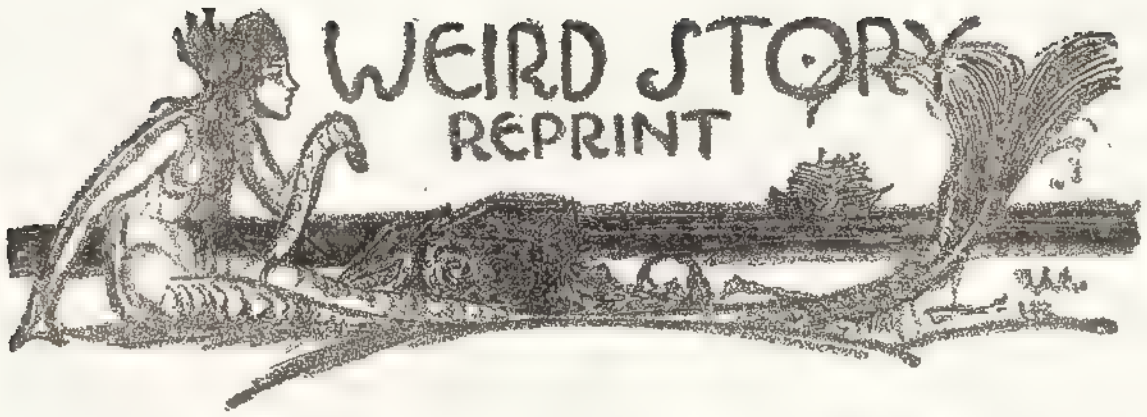
My Tomb

By JAMES E. WARREN, Jr.

Perhaps an Insect-Man from Jupiter
  Will some day crawl across my shattered tomb
Before he sets his sudden ship a-whir
  And drops into the sky. Perhaps will come
Some weirder Thing from out the Further Dark
  And stare above me with its metal face
To where his own world like a shifting spark
  Looms love-lost in the loneliness of space.

They will find nothing but black winds that tore
  That flesh and bone and iron into dust
A million years and ice a million more;
  But they will prove some scientific trust
An ancient held. And they will never know
  That I have died and that I loved you so.

I can call spirits from the vasty deep.
—Shakespeare: *King Henry IV*.



The Fall of the House of Usher

By EDGAR ALLAN POE

Son cœur est un luth suspendu;
Sitôt qu' on le touche il résonne.
—De Bèranger.

DURING the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country, and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. I know not how it was—but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable; for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible.

I looked upon the scene before me—upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain—upon the bleak walls—upon the vacant eye-like windows—upon a few rank sedges—and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees—with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium—the bitter lapse into everyday life—the hideous dropping off of the veil. There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart—an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime. What was it—I paused to think—what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher?

It was a mystery all insoluble; nor could I grapple with the shadowy fancies that crowded upon me as I pondered. I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion, that while, beyond doubt, there *are* combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth. It was possible, I reflected, that a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps to annihilate, its capacity for sorrowful impressions; and, acting upon this idea, I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled luster by the dwelling, and gazed down—but

with a shudder even more thrilling than before—upon the remodeled and inverted images of the gray sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant and eye-like windows.

Nevertheless, in this mansion of gloom I now proposed to myself a sojourn of some weeks. Its proprietor, Roderick Usher, had been one of my boon companions in boyhood; but many years had elapsed since our last meeting. A letter, however, had lately reached me in a distant part of the country—a letter from him—which, in its wildly importunate nature, had admitted of no other than a personal reply. The manuscript gave evidence of nervous agitation. The writer spoke of acute bodily illness—of a mental disorder which oppressed him—and of an earnest desire to see me, as his best and indeed his only personal friend, with a view of attempting, by the cheerfulness of my society, some alleviation of his malady. It was the manner in which all this, and much more, was said—it was the apparent *heart* that went with his request—which allowed me no room for hesitation; and I accordingly obeyed forthwith what I still considered a very singular summons.

Although, as boys, we had been even intimate associates, yet I really knew little of my friend. His reserve had been always excessive and habitual. I was aware, however, that his very ancient family had been noted, time out of mind, for a peculiar sensibility of temperament, displaying itself, through long ages, in many works of exalted art, and manifested, of late, in repeated deeds of munificent yet unobtrusive charity, as well as in a passionate devotion to the intricacies, perhaps even more than to the orthodox and easily recognizable beauties, of musical science.

I had learned, too, the very remarkable fact that the stem of the Usher race, all time-honored as it was, had put forth, at no period, any enduring branch; in other words, that the entire family lay in the direct line of descent, and had always, with very trifling and very temporary variations, so lain. It was this deficiency, I considered, while running over in thought the perfect keeping of the character of the premises with the accredited character of the people, and while speculating upon the possible influence which the one, in the long lapse of centuries, might have exercised upon the other—it was this deficiency, perhaps of collateral issue, and the consequent undeviating transmission, from sire to son, of the patrimony with the name, which had, at length, so identified the two as to merge the original title of the estate in the quaint and equivocal appellation of the "House of Usher"—an appellation which seemed to include, in the minds of the peasantry who used it, both the family and the family mansion.

I HAVE said that the sole effect of my somewhat childish experiment—that of looking down within the tarn—had been to deepen the first singular impression. There can be no doubt that the consciousness of the rapid increase of my superstition—for why should I not so term it?—served mainly to accelerate the increase itself. Such, I have long known, is the paradoxical law of all sentiments having terror as a basis. And it might have been for this reason only, that, when I again uplifted my eyes to the house itself, from its image in the pool, there grew in my mind a strange fancy—a fancy so ridiculous, indeed, that I but mention it to show the vivid force of the sensations which oppressed me. I had so worked upon my imagination as really to believe that about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate vicinity—an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the gray wall, and the

silent tarn—a pestilent and mystic vapor, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible and leaden-hued.

Shaking off from my spirit what *must* have been a dream, I scanned more narrowly the real aspect of the building. Its principal feature seemed to be that of an excessive antiquity. The discoloration of ages had been great. Minute fungi overspread the whole exterior, hanging in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves. Yet all this was apart from any extraordinary dilapidation. No portion of the masonry had fallen; and there appeared to be a wild inconsistency between its still perfect adaptation of parts, and the crumbling condition of the individual stones. In this there was much that reminded me of the specious totality of old wood-work which has rotted for long years in some neglected vault, with no disturbance from the breath of the external air. Beyond this indication of extensive decay, however, the fabric gave little token of instability. Perhaps the eye of a scrutinizing observer might have discovered a barely perceptible fissure, which, extending from the roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn.

Noticing these things, I rode over a short causeway to the house. A servant in waiting took my horse, and I entered the Gothic archway of the hall. A valet, of stealthy step, thence conducted me, in silence, through many dark and intricate passages in my progress to the *studio* of his master. Much that I encountered on the way contributed, I know not how, to heighten the vague sentiments of which I have already spoken. While the objects around me—while the carvings of the ceilings, the somber tapestries of the walls, the ebon blackness of the floors, and the phantasmagoric armorial trophies which rattled as I strode, were but matters to which, or to such as which, I had been accustomed from my infancy—while I hesitated not to acknowledge how familiar was all this—I still wondered to find how unfamiliar were the fancies which ordinary images were stirring up.

On one of the staircases, I met the physician of the family. His countenance, I thought, wore a mingled expression of low cunning and perplexity. He accosted me with trepidation and passed on. The valet now threw open a door and ushered me into the presence of his master.

THE room in which I found myself was very large and lofty. The windows were long, narrow, and pointed, and at so vast a distance from the black oaken floor as to be altogether inaccessible from within. Feeble gleams of encrimsoned light made their way through the trellised panes, and served to render sufficiently distinct the more prominent objects around; the eye, however, struggled in vain to reach the remoter angles of the chamber, or the recesses of the vaulted and fretted ceiling. Dark draperies hung upon the walls. The general furniture was profuse, comfortless, antique, and tattered. Many books and musical instruments lay scattered about, but failed to give any vitality to the scene. I felt that I breathed an atmosphere of sorrow. An air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all.

Upon my entrance, Usher arose from a sofa on which he had been lying at full length, and greeted me with a vivacious warmth which had much in it, I at first thought, of an overdone cordiality—of the constrained effort of the *ennuyé* man of the world. A glance, however, at his countenance convinced me of his perfect sincerity. We sat down; and for some moments, while he spoke not, I gazed upon him with a feeling half of pity, half of awe. Surely, man had never before so terribly altered, in so brief a period, as had Roderick Usher! It was with difficulty that I could bring my-

self to admit the identity of the wan being before me with the companion of my early boyhood. Yet the character of his face had been at all times remarkable. A cadaverousness of complexion; an eye large, liquid, and luminous beyond comparison; lips somewhat thin and very pallid, but of a surpassingly beautiful curve; a nose of a delicate Hebrew model, but with a breadth of nostril unusual in similar formations; a finely molded chin, speaking, in its want of prominence, of a want of moral energy; hair of a more than web-like softness and tenuity—these features, with an inordinate expansion above the regions of the temple, made up altogether a countenance not easily to be forgotten. And now in the mere exaggeration of the prevailing character of these features, and of the expression they were wont to convey, lay so much of change that I doubted to whom I spoke. The now ghastly pallor of the skin, and the now miraculous luster of the eye, above all things startled and even awed me. The silken hair, too, had been suffered to grow all unheeded, and as, in its wild gossamer texture, it floated rather than fell about the face, I could not, even with effort, connect its Arabesque expression with any idea of simple humanity.

In the manner of my friend I was at once struck with an incoherence—an inconsistency; and I soon found this to arise from a series of feeble and futile struggles to overcome an habitual trepidancy—an excessive nervous agitation. For something of this nature I had indeed been prepared, no less by his letter, than by reminiscences of certain boyish traits, and by conclusions deduced from his peculiar physical conformation and temperament. His action was alternately vivacious and sullen. His voice varied rapidly from a tremulous indecision (when the animal spirits seemed utterly in abeyance) to that species of energetic concision—that abrupt, weighty, unhurried, and hollow-sounding enunciation —that leaden, self-balanced, and perfectly modulated guttural utterance, which may be observed in the lost drunkard, or the irreclaimable eater of opium, during the periods of his most intense excitement.

It was thus that he spoke of the object of my visit, of his earnest desire to see me, and of the solace he expected me to afford him. He entered, at some length, into what he conceived to be the nature of his malady. It was, he said, a constitutional and a family evil and one for which he despaired to find a remedy—a mere nervous affection, he immediately added, which would undoubtedly soon pass off. It displayed itself in a host of unnatural sensations. Some of these, as he detailed them, interested and bewildered me; although, perhaps, the terms and the general manner of their narration had their weight. He suffered much from a morbid acuteness of the senses; the most insipid food was alone endurable; he could wear only garments of certain texture; the odors of all flowers were oppressive; his eyes were tortured by even a faint light; and there were but peculiar sounds, and these from stringed instruments, which did not inspire him with horror.

TO AN anomalous species of terror I found him a bounden slave. "I shall perish," said he, "I *must* perish in this deplorable folly. Thus, thus, and not otherwise, shall I be lost. I dread the events of the future, not in themselves, but in their results. I shudder at the thought of any, even the most trivial, incident, which may operate upon this intolerable agitation of soul. I have, indeed, no abhorrence of danger, except in its absolute effect—in terror. In this unnerved, in this pitiable, condition I feel that the period will sooner or later arrive when I must abandon life and reason together, in some struggle with the grim phantasm, FEAR."

I learned, moreover, at intervals, and through broken and equivocal hints,

another singular feature of his mental condition. He was enchained by certain superstitious impressions in regard to the dwelling which he tenanted, and whence, for many years, he had never ventured forth—in regard to an influence whose supposititious force was conveyed in terms too shadowy here to be re-stated—an influence which some peculiarities in the mere form and substance of his family mansion had, by dint of long sufferance, he said, obtained over his spirit—an effect which the *physique* of the gray walls and turrets, and of the dim tarn into which they all looked down, had, at length, brought about upon the *morale* of his existence.

He admitted, however, although with hesitation, that much of the peculiar gloom which thus afflicted him could be traced to a more natural and far more palpable origin —to the severe and long-continued illness —indeed to the evidently approaching dissolution—of a tenderly beloved sister, his sole companion for long years, his last and only relative on earth.

"Her decease," he said, with a bitterness which I can never forget, "would leave him (him, the hopeless and the frail) the last of the ancient race of the Ushers." While he spoke, the lady Madeline (for so was she called) passed through a remote portion of the apartment, and, without having noticed my presence, disappeared. I regarded her with an utter astonishment not unmingled with dread; and yet I found it impossible to account for such feelings. A sensation of stupor oppressed me as my eyes followed her retreating steps. When a door, at length, closed upon her, my glance sought instinctively and eagerly the countenance of the brother; but he had buried his face in his hands, and I could only perceive that a far more than ordinary wanness had overspread the emaciated fingers through which trickled many passionate tears.

The disease of the lady Madeline had long baffled the skill of her physicians. A settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptical character were the unusual diagnosis. Hitherto she had steadily borne up against the pressure of her malady, and had not betaken herself finally to bed; but on the closing in of the evening of my arrival at the house, she succumbed (as her brother told me at night with inexpressible agitation) to the prostrating power of the destroyer; and I learned that the glimpse I had obtained of her person would thus probably be the last I should obtain—that the lady, at least while living, would be seen by me no more.

For several days ensuing, her name was unmentioned by either Usher or myself; and during this period I was busied in earnest endeavors to alleviate the melancholy of my friend. We painted and read together, or I listened, as if in a dream, to the wild improvisations of his speaking guitar. And thus, as a closer and still closer intimacy admitted me more unreservedly into the recesses of his spirit, the more bitterly did I perceive the futility of all attempt at cheering a mind from which darkness, as if an inherent positive quality, poured forth upon all objects of the moral and physical universe in one unceasing radiation of gloom.

I SHALL ever bear about me a memory of the many solemn hours I thus spent alone with the master of the House of Usher. Yet I should fail in any attempt to convey an idea of the exact character of the studies, or of the occupations, in which he involved me, or led me the way. An excited and highly distempered ideality threw a sulfurous luster over all. His long improvised dirges will ring forever in my ears. Among other things, I hold painfully in mind a certain singular perversion and amplification of the wild air of the last waltz of Von Weber. From the

paintings over which his elaborate fancy brooded, and which grew, touch by touch, into vaguenesses at which I shuddered the more thrillingly, because I shuddered knowing not why—from these paintings (vivid as their images now are before me) I would in vain endeavor to educe more than a small portion which should lie within the compass of merely written words. By the utter simplicity, by the nakedness of his designs, he arrested and overawed attention. If ever mortal painted an idea, that mortal was Roderick Usher. For me at least, in the circumstances then surrounding me, there arose out of the pure abstractions which the hypochondriac contrived to throw upon his canvas, an intensity of intolerable awe, no shadow of which felt I ever yet in the contemplation of the certainly glowing yet too concrete reveries of Fuseli.

One of the phantasmagoric conceptions of my friend, partaking not so rigidly of the spirit of abstraction, may be shadowed forth, although feebly, in words. A small picture presented the interior of an immensely long and rectangular vault or tunnel, with low walls, smooth, white and without interruption or device. Certain accessory points of the design served well to convey the idea that this excavation lay at an exceeding depth below the surface of the earth. No outlet was observed in any portion of its vast extent, and no torch or other artificial source of light was discernible; yet a flood of intense rays rolled throughout, and bathed the whole in a ghastly and inappropriate splendor.

I HAVE just spoken of that morbid condition of the auditory nerve which rendered all music intolerable to the sufferer, with the exception of certain effects of stringed instruments. It was, perhaps, the narrow limits to which he thus confined himself upon the guitar which gave birth, in great measure, to the fantastic character of his performances. But the fervid *facility* of his *impromptus* could not be so accounted for. They must have been, and were, in the notes, as well as in the words of his wild fantasias (for he not unfrequently accompanied himself with rimed verbal improvisations), the result of that intense mental collectedness and concentration to which I have previously alluded as observable only in particular moments of the highest artificial excitement. The words of one of these rhapsodies I have easily remembered. I was, perhaps, the more forcibly impressed with it as he gave it, because, in the under or mystic current of its meaning, I fancied that I perceived, and for the first time, a full consciousness on the part of Usher of the tottering of his lofty reason upon her throne. The verses, which were entitled *The Haunted Palace*, ran very nearly, if not accurately, thus:

I

In the greenest of our valleys,
By good angels tenanted,
Once a fair and stately palace—
Radiant palace—reared its head.
In the monarch Thought's dominion—
It stood there!
Never seraph spread a pinion
Over fabric half so fair.

II

Banners yellow, glorious, golden,
On its roof did float and flow
(This—all this—was in the olden
Time long ago);
And every gentle air that dallied,
In that sweet day,
Along the ramparts plumed and pallid,
A winged odor went away.

III

Wanderers in that happy valley
Through two luminous windows saw
Spirits moving musically
To a lute's well-tuned law;
Round about a throne, where sitting
(Porphyrogene!)
In state his glory well befitting,
The ruler of the realm was seen.

IV

And all with pearl and ruby glowing
Was the fair palace door,
Through which came flowing, flowing,
flowing
And sparkling evermore,
A troop of Echoes whose sweet duty
Was but to sing,
In voices of surpassing beauty,
The wit and wisdom of their king.

V

But evil things, in robes of sorrow,
Assailed the monarch's high estate;
(Ah, let us mourn, for never morrow
Shall dawn upon him, desolate!)
And, round about his home, the glory
That blushed and bloomed
Is but a dim-remembered story
Of the old time entombed.

VI

And travelers now within that valley,
Through the red-litten windows see
Vast forms that move fantastically
To a discordant melody;
While, like a rapid ghastly river,
Through the pale door,
A hideous throng rush out forever,
And laugh—but smile no more.

I will remember that suggestions arising from this ballad led us into a train of thought wherein there became manifest an opinion of Usher's, which I mention not so much on account of its novelty (for other men have thought thus), as on account of the pertinacity with which he maintained it. This opinion, in its general form, was that of the sentience of all vegetable things. But in his disordered *Ververt et Chartreuse* of Gresset; the *Belfancy,* the idea had assumed a more daring character, and trespassed, under certain conditions, upon the kingdom of inorganization.

I lack words to express the full extent, or the earnest *abandon* of his persuasion. The belief, however, was connected (as I have previously hinted) with the gray stones of the home of his forefathers. The conditions of the sentence had been here, he imagined, fulfilled in the method of collocation of these stones—in the order of their arrangement, as well as in that of the many *fungi* which overspread them, and of the decayed trees which stood around—above all, in the long undisturbed endurance of this arrangement, and in its reduplication in the still waters of the tarn. Its evidence—the evidence of the sentience—was to be seen, he said (and I here started as he spoke), in the gradual yet certain condensation of an atmosphere of their own about the waters and the walls. The result was discoverable, he added, in that silent yet importunate and terrible influence which for centuries had molded the destinies of his family, and which made *him* what I now saw him—what he was. Such opinions need no comment, and I will make none.

OUR books—the books which, for years, had formed no small portion of the mental existence of the invalid—were, as might be supposed, in strict keeping with this character of phantasm. We pored together over such works as the *Heaven and Hell* of Swedenborg; the *Subterranean Voyage of Nicholas Klimm* by Holberg; the *Chiromancy* of Robert Flud, of Jean D' Indaginé and of Dela Chambre; the *Journey into the Blue Distance* of Tieck; and the *City of the Sun* of Campanella. One favorite volume was a small octavo edition of the *Directorium Inquisitorium,* by the Dominican Eymeric de Gironne; and there were passages in Pomponius Mela, about the old African satyrs and œgipans, over which Usher would sit dreaming for hours. His chief delight, however, was found in the perusal of an exceedingly rare and curious book in quarto Gothic—the manual of a forgotten church—the *Vigiloe Mortuorum secundum Chorum Ecclesioe Maguntinoe.*

I could not help thinking of the wild

ritual of this work, and of its probable influence upon the hypochondriac, when, one evening, having informed me abruptly that the lady Madeline was no more, he stated his intention of preserving her corpse for a fortnight (previously to its final interment), in one of the numerous vaults within the main walls of the building. The worldly reason however, assigned for this singular proceeding, was one which I did not feel at liberty to dispute. The brother had been led to his resolution (so he told me) by consideration of the unusual character of the malady of the deceased, of certain obtrusive and eager inquiries on the part of her medical men, and of the remote and exposed situation of the burial-ground of the family. I will not deny that when I called to mind the sinister countenance of the person whom I met upon the staircase, on the day of my arrival at the house, I had no desire to oppose what I regarded as at best but a harmless, and by no means an unnatural, precaution.

At the request of Usher, I personally aided him in the arrangements for the temporary entombment. The body having been encoffined, we two alone bore it to its rest. The vault in which we placed it (and which had been so long unopened that our torches, half smothered in its oppressive atmosphere, gave us little opportunity for investigation) was small, damp, and entirely without means of admission for light; lying, at great depth, immediately beneath that portion of the building in which was my own sleeping-apartment. It had been used, apparently, in remote feudal times, for the worst purposes of a donjon-keep, and, in later days, as a place of deposit for powder, or some other highly combustible substance, as a portion of its floor, and the whole interior of a long archway through which we reached it, were carefully sheathed with copper. The door, of massive iron, had been, also, similarly protected. Its immense weight caused an unusually sharp, grating sound, as it moved upon its hinges.

Having deposited our mournful burden upon trestles within this region of horror, we partially turned aside the yet unscrewed lid of the coffin, and looked upon the face of the tenant. A striking similitude between the brother and sister now first arrested my attention; and Usher, divining, perhaps, my thoughts, murmured out some few words from which I learned that the deceased and himself had been twins, and that sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature had always existed between them. Our glances, however, rested not long upon the dead—for we could not regard her unawed. The disease which had thus entombed the lady in the maturity of youth, had left, as usual in all maladies of a strictly cataleptical character, the mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and the face, and that suspiciously lingering smile upon the lips which is so terrible in death. We replaced and screwed down the lid, and, having secured the door of iron, made our way, with toil, into the scarcely less gloomy apartments of the upper portion of the house.

And now, some days of bitter grief having elapsed, an observable change came over the features of the mental disorder of my friend. His ordinary manner had vanished. His ordinary occupations were neglected or forgotten. He roamed from chamber to chamber with hurried, unequal, and objectless step. The pallor of his countenance had assumed, if possible, a more ghastly hue—but the luminousness of his eye had utterly gone out. The once occasional huskiness of his tone was heard no more; and a tremulous quaver, as if of extreme terror, habitually characterized his utterance. There were times, indeed, when I thought his unceasingly agitated mind was laboring with some oppressive secret, to divulge which he struggled for the necessary courage. At times, again, I was

obliged to resolve all into the mere inexplicable vagaries of madness, for I beheld him gazing upon vacancy for long hours, in an attitude of the profoundest attention, as if listening to some imaginary sound. It was no wonder that his condition terrified—that it infected me. I felt creeping upon me, by slow yet certain degrees, the wild influences of his own fantastic yet impressive superstitions.

It was, especially, upon retiring to bed late in the night of the seventh or eighth day after the placing of the lady Madeline within the donjon, that I experienced the full power of such feelings. Sleep came not near my couch—while the hours waned and waned away. I struggled to reason off the nervousness which had dominion over me.

I endeavored to believe that much, if not all of what I felt, was due to the bewildering influence of the gloomy furniture of the room—of the dark and tattered draperies, which, tortured into motion by the breath of a rising tempest, swayed fitfully to and fro upon the walls, and rustled uneasily about the decorations of the bed. But my efforts were fruitless. An irrepressible tremor gradually pervaded my frame; and, at length, there sat upon my very heart an incubus of utterly causeless alarm. Shaking this off with a gasp and a struggle, I uplifted myself upon the pillows, and, peering earnestly within the intense darkness of the chamber, harkened—I know not why, except that an instinctive spirit prompted me—to certain low and indefinite sounds which came, through the pauses of the storm, at long intervals, I knew not whence. Overpowered by an intense sentiment of horror, unaccountable yet unendurable, I threw on my clothes with haste (for I felt that I should sleep no more during the night), and endeavored to arouse myself from the pitiable condition into which I had fallen by pacing rapidly to and fro through the apartment.

I HAD taken but few turns in this manner, when a light step on an adjoining staircase arrested my attention. I presently recognized it as that of Usher. In an instant afterward he rapped, with a gentle touch, at my door, and entered, bearing a lamp. His countenance was, as usual, cadaverously wan—but, moreover, there was a species of mad hilarity in his eyes—an evidently restrained *hysteria* in his whole demeanor. His air appalled me—but anything was preferable to the solitude which I had so long endured, and I even welcomed his presence as a relief.

"And you have not seen it?" he said abruptly, after having stared about him for some moments in silence—"you have not then seen it?—but, stay! you shall."

Thus speaking, and having carefully shaded his lamp, he hurried to one of the casements, and threw it freely open to the storm.

The impetuous fury of the entering gust nearly lifted us from our feet. It was, indeed, a tempestuous yet sternly beautiful night, and one wildly singular in its terror and its beauty. A whirlwind had apparently collected its force in our vicinity; for there were frequent and violent alterations in the direction of the wind; and the exceeding density of the clouds (which hung so low as to press upon the turrets of the house) did not prevent our perceiving the life-like velocity with which they flew careering from all points against each other, without passing away into the distance. I say that even their exceeding density did not prevent our perceiving this—yet we had no glimpse of the moon or stars, nor was there any flashing forth of the lightning. But the under surfaces of the huge masses of agitated vapor, as well as all terrestrial objects immediately around us, were glowing in the unnatural light of a faintly luminous and distinctly visible gaseous exhalation which hung about and enshrouded the mansion.

"You must not—you shall not behold this!" said I, shuddering, to Usher, as I led him, with a gentle violence, from the window to a seat. "These appearances, which bewilder you, are merely electrical phenomena not uncommon—or it may be that they have their ghastly origin in the rank miasma of the tarn. Let us close this casement—the air is chilling and dangerous to your frame. Here is one of your favorite romances. I will read, and you shall listen:—and so we will pass away this terrible night together."

THE antique volume which I had taken up was the *Mad Trist* of Sir Launcelot Canning; but I had called it a favorite of Usher's more in sad jest than in earnest; for, in truth, there is little in its uncouth and unimaginative prolixity which could have had interest for the lofty and spiritual ideality of my friend. It was, however, the only book immediately at hand; and I indulged a vague hope that the excitement which now agitated the hypochondriac, might find relief (for the history of mental disorder is full of similar anomalies) even in the extremeness of the folly which I should read. Could I have judged, indeed, by the wild overstrained air of vivacity with which he harkened, or apparently harkened to the words of the tale, I might well have congratulated myself upon the success of my design.

I had arrived at that well-known portion of the story where Ethelred, the hero of the Trist, having sought in vain for peaceable admission into the dwelling of the hermit, proceeds to make good an entrance by force. Here, it will be remembered, the words of the narrative run thus:

"And Ethelred, who was by nature of a doughty heart, and who was now mighty withal, on account of the powerfulness of the wine which he had drunken, waited no longer to hold parley with the hermit, who, in sooth, was of an obstinate and maliceful turn, but feeling the rain upon his shoulders, and fearing the rising of the tempest, uplifted his mace outright, and, with blows, made quickly room in the plankings of the door for his gauntleted hand; and now pulling therewith sturdily, he so cracked, and ripped, and tore all asunder, that the noise of the dry and hollow-sounding wood alarumed and reverberated throughout the forest."

At the termination of this sentence I started and, for a moment, paused; for it appeared to me (although I at once concluded that my excited fancy had deceived me)—it appeared to me that, from some very remote portion of the mansion, there came, indistinctly to my ears, what might have been, in its exact similarity of character, the echo (but a stifled and dull one certainly) of the very cracking and ripping sound which Sir Launcelot had so particularly described. It was, beyond doubt, the coincidence alone which had arrested my attention; for, amid the rattling of the sashes of the casements, and the ordinary commingled noises of the still increasing storm, the sound, in itself, had nothing, surely, which should have interested or disturbed me. I continued the story:

"But the good champion Ethelred, now entering within the door, was sore enraged and amazed to perceive no signal of the maliceful hermit; but, in the stead thereof, a dragon of a scaly and prodigious demeanor, and of a fiery tongue, which sate in guard before a palace of gold, with a floor of silver; and upon the wall there hung a shield of shining brass with this legend enwritten—

Who entereth herein, a conqueror hath bin;
Who slayeth the dragon, the shield he shall win.

And Ethelred uplifted his mace, and struck upon the head of the dragon, which fell before him, and gave up his pesty breath, with a shriek so horrid and harsh, and withal so piercing, that Ethelred had fain

to close his ears with his hands against the dreadful noise of it, the like whereof was never before heard."

HERE again I paused abruptly, and now with a feeling of wild amazement—for there could be no doubt whatever that, in this instance, I did actually hear (although from what direction it proceeded I found it impossible to say) a low and apparently distant, but harsh, protracted, and most unusual screaming or grating sound—the exact counterpart of what my fancy had already conjured up for the dragon's unnatural shriek as described by the romancer.

Oppressed, as I certainly was, upon the extraordinary coincidence, by a thousand conflicting sensations, in which wonder and extreme terror were predominant, I still retained sufficient presence of mind to avoid exciting, by an observation, the sensitive nervousness of my companion.

I was by no means certain that he had noticed the sounds in question; although, assuredly, a strange alteration had, during the last few minutes, taken place in his demeanor. From a position fronting my own, he had gradually brought round his chair, so as to sit with his face to the door of the chamber; and thus I could but partially perceive his features, although I saw that his lips trembled as if he were murmuring inaudibly. His head had dropped upon his breast—yet I knew that he was not asleep, from the wide and rigid opening of the eye as I caught a glance of it in profile. The motion of his body, too, was at variance with this idea—for he rocked from side to side with a gentle yet constant and uniform sway.

Having rapidly taken notice of all this, I resumed the narrative of Sir Lancelot, which thus proceeded:

"And now, the champion, having escaped from the terrible fury of the dragon, bethinking himself of the brazen shield, and of the breaking up of the enchantment which was upon it, removed the carcass from out of the way before him, and approached valorously over the silver pavement of the castle to where the shield was upon the wall; which in sooth tarried not for his full coming, but fell down at his feet upon the silver floor, with a mighty great and terrible ringing sound."

No sooner had these syllables passed my lips, than—as if a shield of brass had indeed, at the moment, fallen heavily upon a floor of silver—I became aware of a distinct, hollow, metallic, and clangorous, yet apparently muffled, reverberation. Completely unnerved, I leaped to my feet; but the measured rocking movement of Usher was undisturbed. I rushed to the chair in which he sat. His eyes were bent fixedly before him, and throughout his whole countenance there reigned a stony rigidity. But, as I placed my hand upon his shoulder, there came a strong shudder over his whole person; a sickly smile quivered about his lips; and I saw that he spoke in a low, hurried, and gibbering murmur, as if unconscious of my presence. Bending closely over him I at length drank in the hideous import of his words.

"Not hear it?—yes, I hear it, and *have* heard it. Long—long—long—many minutes, many hours, many days, have I heard it—yet I dared not—oh, pity me, miserable wretch that I am!—I dared not—I *dared* not speak! *We have put her living in the tomb!* Said I not that my senses were acute? I *now* tell you that I heard her first feeble movements in the hollow coffin. I heard them—many, many days ago—yet I dared not—*I dared not speak!* And now—tonight—Ethelred—ha! ha!—the breaking of the hermit's door, and the death-cry of the dragon, and the clangor of the shield—say, rather, the rending of her coffin, and the grating of the iron hinges of her prison, and her struggles within the coppered archway of the vault! Oh! whither shall I fly?

Will she not be here anon? Is she not hurrying to upbraid me for my haste? Have I not heard her footstep on the stair? Do I not distinguish that heavy and horrible beating of her heart? Madman!"—here he sprang furiously to his feet, and shrieked out his syllables, as if in the effort he were giving up his soul—*"Madman! I tell you that she now stands without the door!"*

As if in the superhuman energy of his utterance there had been found the potency of a spell, the huge antique panels to which the speaker pointed threw slowly back, upon the instant, their ponderous and ebony jaws. It was the work of the rushing gust—but then without those doors there *did* stand the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher. There was blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame. For a moment she remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold—then, with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated.

From that chamber, and from that mansion, I fled aghast. The storm was still abroad in all its wrath as I found myself crossing the old causeway. Suddenly there shot along the path a wild light, and I turned to see whence a gleam so unusual could have issued, for the vast house and its shadows were alone behind me. The radiance was that of the full, setting, and blood-red moon, which now shone vividly through that once barely discernible fissure, of which I have before spoken as extending from the roof of the building, in a zigzag direction, to the base. While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened—there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind—the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight—my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder—there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters—and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the "House of Usher."

The Gardens of Yin

By H. P. LOVECRAFT

Beyond the wall, whose ancient masonry
Reached almost to the sky in moss-thick towers,
There would be terraced gardens rich with flowers,
And flutter of bird and butterfly and bee.
There would be walks, and bridges arching over
Warm lotus-pools reflecting temple eaves,
And cherry trees with delicate boughs and leaves
Against a pink sky where the herons hover.

All would be there, for had not old dreams flung
Open the gate to that stone-lanterned maze
Where drowsy streams spin out their winding ways,
Trailed by green vines from bending branches hung?
I hurried, but when the wall rose, grim and great,
I found there was no longer any gate.

MANY of you, the readers, have written to the Eyrie asking whether the double-dating of the June-July issue meant that WEIRD TALES was changing to a bi-monthly. The answer is no. Despite the combining of the June and July issues, the magazine remains a monthly. All subscriptions will be automatically extended one month.

No Brother, We Assure You

Charles H. Chandler writes from Wooster, Ohio: "For a couple of months now I've been reluctant to bother you, who are already so bothered with letters and comments and criticisms; but I can no longer contain myself. The human being does not exist who can read an issue of WT of the quality of your June-July one without forthwith going out and shouting to all the world about it. Two Lovecraft stories of rare excellence—another installment of Howard's *Almuric,* which has been consistently exciting and interesting (not to mention that it is an outstanding literary job—*Far Below,* which is one weird tale in a thousand—Clark Ashton Smith's delicate Chinese fantasy (Smith seems to know more about the Middle Kingdom than do most writers on the subject)—all those in one issue! I don't wonder you combined the June and July issues—you had enough good stories for two issues, and the rest would likely have been filler and so as well left out. The only drawback is that such an issue makes the reader want more, and soon—which you are denying him. . . . I hardly know what story to give my vote to for first place in the June-July issue. The Lovecraft stories are tops for literary merit, as is Smith's work also. *Far Below* was well written and convincing, which *Giants of Anarchy* definitely was not. . . . I guess first place goes to *Celephais,* with the others all tied for a very near second—a photo-finish, to be exact. The shorts were good as a rule, but not up to, say, Kuttner's *The Watcher at the Door* in the May issue. (My vote goes to *The Hollow Moon* for first in that issue.) Now about the illustrations. Your artists are all good, but Finlay is still without serious competition. (Perhaps some would be good for him.) His distinctive and most effective style is his line-work—cross-hatch—and stipple. But lately he's been dashing off a lot of charcoal work which looks as if just anyone had done it—and I don't like that a bit! Not that it isn't good of its kind—but this kind isn't good enough. But his series of full-page illustrations (and the one in the June-July issue is O. K. with a capital K) is still a fine thing and I'm all for it. I second Reader O'Connell's suggestion of a Finlay cover from literature. Let's have one, not only once but often."

A Literary Diet

E. K. McCabe writes from Toledo, Ohio: "This, my initial attempt at elaboration on the contents of a magazine to its editors may lack the polished finesse of a regular critic, but everything has a beginning. I wouldn't take trouble except that I have been interested in mythology and metaphysics for a number of years and yours is the only magazine on the market to brush upon those sub-

jects. In my opinion one of the best stories printed between your covers was the beautiful *More Lives Than One,* by Seabury Quinn, published in a recent issue. Another tale I enjoyed greatly was *The Quest of Iranon,* by H. P. Lovecraft. This tale told a poignant truth, the hopelessness of a search for the ultimate beauty and the ethereal plane. The end of the seeker was sorrowful but inevitable. *The Return of Hastur* was an excellent tale of the Elder Gods. Let us have more stories of these types and now and then toss in a tale of vampirism or lycanthropy for dessert. WEIRD TALES is unique in its field and presents a literary diet not easily found. I have been a steady reader for the last seven years, but any more hackneyed trash like that disclosed in *The Stratosphere Menace* and *Giant-Plasm* and others of their ilk and I'll throw up my hands. Stay out of science-fiction—the field is glutted. I enjoy lusty tales like those written by Robert E. Howard, now deceased, although at times I am bored with the undefeatability of the Herculean heroes."

Quite Some Fellow

Caroline Ferber writes from Chicago: "Now to get to the May issue—with a compliment to Everil Worrell for a fine piece of entertainment in *The Hollow Moon.* Let me say right now that *Almuric* is about the best and most unusual of any Howard story I've read. We still lament the loss of so fine a writer—so brilliant a brain. Esau Cairn of Almuric is quite some fellow—the illustrations really bring him wonderfully to life. As for the tale itself—absorbing—too absorbing—very good all around—and I'm glad there are two more installments. The verse of Howell Calhoun, *The Plumed Serpent,* is good. *Witch's Hair* has a Medusa tang—excellent reading. Ah-h—the reprint, *The Dead Soul,* embodied an ideal fearful idea—new to me—amazing and chilling."

Best Magazine in Pulp Paper

John Chapman writes from Minneapolis: "My congratulations to Everil Worrell for her outstanding word-picture, *The Hollow Moon.* It ranks unquestionably as the best story in the May issue. Quinn's *Washington Nocturne* was good. We should have more of this type and a little less of Jules de Grandin. They're still talking about *Roads,* and I don't blame them. Paul Ernst is always dependable, but couldn't the hero be someone besides a reporter—just for a change? *Witch's Hair* and the reprint were both excellent. Kuttner's story was fair—*The Transgressor* was much better. *The Phantom Island* was the best of the short stories. DeLay's cover was good. He couldn't have picked a better scene to illustrate. Thanks for the 160 pages—it helps a lot. You still have the best magazine printed on pulp paper."

Into Vigorous Maturity

Sam Moskowitz writes from Newark, New Jersey: "The May issue is the last step in improvement as WEIRD TALES swings into vigorous maturity. That new type was all that was needed to restore to 'the Unique Magazine' that indefinable atmosphere which 'makes' WEIRD TALES. Words cannot begin to express my appreciation of Robert E. Howard's supreme masterpiece, *Almuric.* The story has everything. *The Hollow Moon* was really *weird.* It is one of the weirdest pseudo-science stories ever composed. I was especially pleased to see Lester del Rey represented in your pages. He has 'it' and more. The digging up of posthumous works of such authors as H. P. Lovecraft and Arlton Eadie, such as you have done in your latest number, is doubtless one of the reasons why Seymour Kapetansky enthuses 'I *love* WEIRD TALES,' in your May reader's department. We all share Mr. Kapetansky's views. Keep that excellent new type, whatever you do." [The "new type" was designed by Claude Garamond, a French printer of the Sixteenth Century, whose graceful type designs were so admired by his contemporaries that he gave up printing and devoted the rest of his life to designing and cutting type faces for other printers.—THE EDITOR.]

The Great Howard

John V. Baltadonis writes from Philadelphia: "There isn't the slightest doubt in my

mind that *Almuric* is the best story in the May issue—for a great many issues, in fact. I hope the story is long and takes up about six installments (every one thirty pages)! With the absence of Howard's action stories from the pages of WEIRD TALES, one almost begins to believe that such authors as Ball, Kuttner, etc., are capable of taking the place of the creator of Conan; however, upon reading *Almuric*, one realizes that such as they cannot even begin to compare with the great Howard. Needless to say, the stirring tale of Esau Cairn is super-excellent. *Cross of Fire*, by Lester del Rey, was an interesting short tale. Unusual treatment of the vampire element, to say the least. I welcomed *The Phantom Island*, a really good story. *The Hollow* Moon, Everil Worrell's contribution, is another 'different' vampire yarn. Very good. *The Dark Isle*, *Washington Nocturne*, *The Face at Death Corner*, were all good. It seems that since WEIRD TALES has changed publishers, it has been getting better all along. WEIRD TALES, at present, is better than it has been for a long, long time. The best illustrations for the issue are those by Finlay for *Almuric*. As usual, the poem interpretation is excellent. Harry Ferman, your newest artist, is also very good; I expect to see some very good work by him in your future issues."

Keep WT Weird

Arthur S. Doan writes from Fort Wayne, Indiana: "After a four years' silence I am again writing to the Eyrie. I have read all the issues of WEIRD TALES and can say truthfully that there have not been any issues that were not worth the money. Some issues, of course, are much superior to others. I have seen many changes in WT since the first issue and think that they have all been for the best with the exception of the few bi-monthly issues put out several years ago. Now that we have the new larger magazine I should be satisfied, but I believe there is still room for improvement in the covers. . . . I see that the contributors to the Eyrie are becoming more international than ever. That is all to the good, as they all seem to be genuine *weird* tale fans. The biggest asset WT has is that the stories are *weird*. Let's keep it that way. Some stories well written and entertaining find their way into 'our' magazine which have no business there. One of these is Seabury Quinn's *Washington Nocturne* in the May issue. It suffers much in comparison with such a story as *The Hollow Moon*, which I vote the outstanding story in this issue. . . . You have so many good authors that it would be unfair to try and pick favorites. I like all of them. I think that Clark Ashton Smith writes the 'weirdest' weird tales."

What a Story!

Dale Lehner writes from Youngstown, Ohio: "I have just finished reading the May issue of WT and I can truthfully say it is one of the finest issues you have ever produced. The best story is *The Hollow Moon*. This story was all you claimed for it and a good deal more besides. What a story! One to read and reread. It really was different. Please give us more by this splendid author soon. *Washington Nocturne* by Quinn was my second choice. A splendid story. Quinn can always be depended on to produce something unusual."

Too Much Lettering

Harry Warner, Jr. writes from Hagerstown, Maryland: "The cover on the July WT is pretty good, but spoiled by all that lettering. Can't you remove some of it? I really think that it would attract more attention if left without any distractions at all. Poetry exceptionally fine this time, especially Lovecraft and *They Run Again*. Such gruesomeness! Seems to me that Seabury Quinn slipped up just a wee mite on a point in *Mansions in the Sky*. The thing that leaves fingerprints is a very thin coating of oil on the fingertips. Yet, there was no way for this oil to be on the synthetic fingerprints on the gloves, so how in the world did they find them? *Celephais* is exquisitely beautiful; its only rival is *The Quest of Iranon*. *The Willow Landscape* certainly is intriguing, no doubt about it. *The Stroke of Twelve* produced a chilly feeling in the nether regions of my vertebræ; first time that's happened since *Up Under the Roof*. And last but not least, *Far Below* had more of

a convincing quality to it than anything I've read in a long time—in plot, that is. Almost makes me feel like investigating the New York subway system myself."

Praise for the Cover

Frank Bryan, Jr., writes from Nelson, Oklahoma: "Please don't tell me that WT is going bi-monthly; that would be like half killing me. I have always been of the opinion that if you could get enough stories you should come out once a week. I sincerely hope that this will be the only double issue this year. . . . Up to now I have not thought you had put out a good cover, since you apparently do not like Brundage, but whatever I have said or thought I take it back, as the cover on the July issue is impossible to praise highly enough. I think you should not have printed any matter on the cover though, or else have it sort of boxed in down at the bottom. . . . The stories are always good, or better, so there is no need to say anything about them. The more Robert E. Howard and H. P. Lovecraft stories you print the better I will like it. I am not one of your old readers who are able to refer to King Kull and other classics, so I would appreciate very much your reprinting old Howard and Lovecraft stories. The best story in this issue I think is *Almuric.*"

That Oooogy Feeling

George Aylesworth writes from Mackinaw City, Michigan: "The reprint in the July issue, *Imprisoned with the Pharaohs,* was excellent. *Almuric* is coming along nicely and other good ones in this issue were *Mansions in the Sky, Far Below,* and *Lens-Shy.* I don't want to renew the interplanetaryarn squabble of '33, but don't you think there are enough mags now (9) devoted to science-fiction so that you do not have to print that type of story? I am a confirmed scientifiction nut but I like WEIRD TALES, the only mag of its kind, to be *weird.* In spite of all my brickbats, I'll still buy WT, the only mag that gives me—shall we say, Miss Ferber?—that oooogy feeling."

Diversity of Material

E. Hoffman Price writes from California: "The local colony of writers and would-be writers has for some time marvelled at the diversity of material you offer in WT. As nearly as humanly possible, you seem to have made WT devoid of any 'policy' beyond the broad limitation that the yarn must involve an element of fantasy. While it is true that not every item occuring in the sacred pages is greeted with frenzies of approbation, some of the yarns that have griped us have made quite a hit with other readers; and appealing to a diversity of tastes is really an accomplishment."

A Horse Race

Leah Bodine Drake writes from Owensboro, Kentucky: "I wouldn't have believed it possible if I hadn't seen it happen, but WT keeps right on doing it. Doing what? Not the 'Turkey Trot,' but putting out a better magazine every month, every one of those 160 pages! This last issue was a dilly! First honors go to Seabury Quinn. I don't see how he does it, but he crashes through every so often with a story so fine, so beautifully written, so sincere, that I think the man must be inhuman. *Washington Nocturne* was a bit off the beaten track for WT, being less of a weird tale than a timely piece of propaganda, and 'pointing a moral.' It is hard to pick out the place and show horses (it's race-time down in 'Old Kaintuck'!), but my money went on *Almuric* for place, with *Watcher at the Door* and *The Face at Death Corner* tying in a dead heat for third. The others were all thrilling and intriguing tales, especially *The Dark Isle;* and if the others had to be, of necessity, also-rans, it was a stake-race and not a claiming one. (To get back into English, they were all good, even if they didn't make first, second and third places in my judgment.) The poetry, as is usual in WT, was good. How Virgil Finlay's inventive powers keep going at full stride I cannot imagine. He rings the bell every time with his eery picturizations of famous weird poems. . . . That man surely uses a quill of the Ruhk, or a feather from the wing of a Marid—no earthly pen could ever limn such scenes."

Masters of the Weird

Paul I. McCleave writes from Nantucket, Massachusetts: "Primarily this missive is in-

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tended as humble tribute to two great masters of the true weird (one of them is no longer with us): Robert E. Howard and Seabury Quinn. To say that I merely enjoyed *Almuric* would be a gross understatement; for I visited there an alien world, fought back to back with the strongest man of two planets, suffered the cold of the peril-fraught night. Surely, no mean author it is who can thus gain such absolute control over the subconscious of his readers. With *Washington Nocturne* it is slightly different: here one feels an inner conflict, the futility of war in the light of individual suffering and loss. Whether or not the Unknown Soldier does fill such a splendid capacity is a thing to ponder on; at any rate, it is (in one man's opinion) the most superior tale in the May issue. Congratulations! Thanks for the DeLay cover. Though I consider Finlay your most satisfying artist, I think a bit of variety won't hurt a bit. And, oh yes, how about a Brundage nude on the cover—as a sort of pleasant surprise?"

No Dog Tags?

Joseph A. Lovchik writes from Minto, North Dakota: "In the May issue of WEIRD TALES appears the story *Washington Nocturne* by Seabury Quinn, and on page 50, right side, 14th line, it is stated that officers in the A. E. F. wore no identification or 'dog tags.' This is wrong, I have upon good authority. The stories *The Hollow Moon* by Everil Worrell and the above-mentioned *Washington Nocturne* were my choice. . . . I have not missed an issue of WT since the 1923 number wherein appeared *Ooze*."

That Iceberg Cover

Sonya Ardell writes from Miami, Florida: "This is the first fan letter I've ever written to any magazine, mainly because up till now I just haven't taken time off for such things, but after seeing the May issue of WEIRD TALES, I just had to steal the time to let you know that after viewing Harold DeLay's cover and illustrations for this issue I consider him the master artist of them all so far, in this particular field of art work. His delicate handling of colors for the cover was fascinating

and his black and white illustrations were exceptionally fine too, as were also Virgil Finlay's, and in fact I don't see how anyone could fail to appreciate all the illustrations in this issue because they were certainly above par."

Lovecraft's Works

Thomas O. Mabbott writes from New York City: "I do not usually like serials; they tend to taper off at the end. But *Fearful Rock* was excellent, and ended as well as it began. *Almuric* starts well; may it keep up the pace. I do not know if Lovecraft or Howard was the greater loss, but as Howard was younger, the potential loss was worse. By the way, is there no chance of a collected edition of Lovecraft? He deserves one." [Messrs. Derleth and Wandrei are preparing a collected edition of Lovecraft's stories, poems and letters.—THE EDITOR.]

We Are Not Bored

Richard Kraft writes from Elizabeth, New Jersey: "Well, the irresistible urge to send a letter to good old WT has me again, so here goes. The May WT contains a maximum of good yarns. Best I liked Kuttner's short, a well-done, novel tale. Quinn scores heavily with *Washington Nocturne,* and Paul Ernst gets third place with *The Face at Death Corner.* The rest of the stories were o. k. with the exception of these three: *The Hollow Moon, Not Both,* and *The Dark Isle.* Maybe *The Hollow Moon* is a very extraordinary yarn and that I'm cuckoo; but it seems that Worrell's style is a bit too complicated and involved for the story's own good. *Not Both* was very usual and very mediocre; and surprise of surprises, Bob Bloch comes to shame with *The Dark Isle.* Tch! Tch! This story seemed to me a hodgepodge of thisa and thata: more like a cheap blood-and-thunder thriller than anything else! Well, now that I've commented on the stories and bored you to tears, I'll close."

Stories Always Good

S. Brown, Jr., writes to the Eyrie: "You often state that WT is run by the readers. May I offer a few suggestions then? I have

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made some of these before but I will mention them again: (1) New cut for the table of contents head; (2) New typography—like the kind you had in Chicago; (3) As much as I hate to say it, Virgil was eclipsed by Harry Ferman in this last issue. . . . Your stories are always good." [Since April, WEIRD TALES has used the graceful Garamond type as of yore.—THE EDITOR.]

Life of Poe

Willis Conover, Jr., writes from Salisbury, Maryland: "I was pleased to note your announcement of the forthcoming Finlay picturization of Poe's *Raven*, on the cover. I am sure Virgil's painting will be a memorable one. This is of particular interest to me because we have chosen (here at the State Teachers College) as this year's major production, *Plumes in the Dust*, Sophie Treadwell's story of the tragic life of Edgar Allan Poe."

Baby Talk

Charles Wilkos writes from Chicago: "I'm not in the habit of writing regularly, but this month I had to. Swell cover, best piece of cover work I've seen in a long while. Haven't tired of studying it yet. Kindly forward a hearty pat on the back of our able Mr. Finlay. *Almuric* takes the monthly throne in our estimation. Although you announced R. E. Howard did not polish it up, it's still a masterpiece to me! 'Old Faithful' Seabury Quinn could whip up a good barbarian tale. Consider it a request. *Celephais* runs second. HPL imbued it with a dream-like intangible quality that's absorbing. *Far Below* takes third with its horror that leaps at you as the narrator progresses. Hats off to many old friends in the Eyrie for many interesting letters, but—one thing rubs my fur the wrong way and that's the lackabrain females that haven't mastered the English language and voice their comments in baby talk."

Congratulations

B. Reagan writes from Pittsburgh: "Congratulations are due for the July issue. Seabury Quinn (as usual) leads with *Mansions in the Sky*. Johnson's *Far Below* easily takes

second honors, while Bryan's *The Sitter in the Mound* competes with Kummer's *The Man Who Came Back*. Fourth honors are divided between Cave's *The Death Watch* and Clayton's *Lens-Shy*."

A Fine Story

Robert Bloch writes from Milwaukee: "In the May issue, Quinn's story, while of a 'sentimental' type, seems to me to bid fair to equal *Roads* in popularity. I predict that it will be extremely well acclaimed by the readers for its smooth writing. Am awaiting the Munn serial with interest, and further HPL reprints. I got a real kick out of reading WT while convalescing."

Concise Comments

Mrs. Hazel Heald writes from Somerville, Massachusetts: "Your improved and larger magazine contains a feast of reading enjoyment."

C. R. D. Styche writes from Hull, England: "I have been buying WT since August, 1937, and feel I must write and offer congratulations on a really fine book. We find so many 'blood and thunder' thrillers on the American market that it is really refreshing to find a decent well-written story."

Donald Ford writes from Kingston, Ohio: "Now that your size has been increased, why not reprint a few serials? Serials that have not been printed in WT before should be popular."

E. B. Hardy writes from Lewiston, Maine: "It is a real treat to read a story like Robert E. Howard's *Almuric*, and I consider it a good spring tonic for winter-weary folk."

Most Popular Story

Readers, what is your favorite story in this issue? Write a letter or a postcard to the Eyrie, WEIRD TALES, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York City, giving your views, for it is only by hearing from you that we can know whether we are pleasing you or not. The most popular story in the May issue, as shown by your votes and letters, was the first installment of Robert E. Howard's epic serial, *Almuric*.

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COMING NEXT MONTH

QUIET HAD descended upon the countryside, and a thin moon ha
I was standing at the window when I heard someone on th
below. I thought it was Sir John's night watchman, Sulla
paid no attention to the sounds. It was not until somewh
that it occurred to me that the sounds were not at all like those
would make—they were too stealthy, like creeping footsteps. This t
had no sooner occurred to me than the sound of another pair of adv
footsteps came from around one corner of the rambling house.

Then abruptly came a hoarse cry from below. "Robbers!"

"Sullatt!" exclaimed Sir John, coming quickly to the windo
peering over my shoulders. The window was wide open; so both
leaned out.

There below us on the lawn, some twenty feet from the house
a dark figure shouting at the top of his lungs: "Robbers in the lib

A dark form hurtled from the shadowy lower floor and launched
straight across the lawn at Sullatt. The night watchman went dov
a log; behind me Sir John whirled and ran from the room.

I would have followed, but at the same instant someone else r
the library below and turned on the light—and I saw the face of th
who was struggling with Sullatt. Sullatt was on his back, his arms b
feebly upward, and his mysterious assailant was bending over hi
shoulders oddly misshapen and hunched up, straining the clothe
seemed to bind his body—all this I saw as the light from the l
streamed out across the lawn from the open French window. All
and more. For as the light flashed forth and Sullatt lay quiet, the mar
looked up, his head thrown back, his mouth horribly distended, and hi
glaring into the light—and it was *the face of Jason Warwick!*

A moment later he turned and vanished in the darkness beyon
hedge. Then I ran down the stairs, and came into the library just a
John was running out by way of the French window. The butler had
ceded him to where Sullatt lay, and I was not far behind when he rea
the body. . . .

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Leslie Howard

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